



H-Gram 071: USS *Hobson* and USS *Neosho*

3 May 2022

Overview

This H-gram covers the loss of destroyer-minesweeper USS Hobson (DD-464/DMS-26) and 176 of her crew in a collision with carrier USS Wasp (CV-18) on 26 April 1952, the largest loss of U.S. Navy life since World War II. For the 80th anniversary of World War II, this H-gram also reprises previous H-grams on the Doolittle Raid and the Battle of the Coral Sea, with an addition covering the extraordinary and largely forgotten valor of the fleet oiler USS Neosho (AO-23).

70th Anniversary of the Loss of USS Hobson

The destroyer-minesweeper USS Hobson survived battle with a Vichy French submarine and a German U-boat, dueled German heavy shore batteries at Utah Beach, Cherbourg, and off southern France, attempted to rescue a troopship in mined waters in a violent gale, and recovered from a direct hit by a bomb from a disintegrated kamikaze at Okinawa. Hobson did not survive "a grave error in



USS *Hobson* (DD-464) off Charleston, South Carolina, 4 March 1942. She is painted in camouflage Measure 12 (Modified). This photograph was censored to remove radar antennas atop her foremast and Mark 37 gun director (NH 53548).

judgment" on the part of her commanding officer on the night of 26 April 1952 in the North Atlantic.

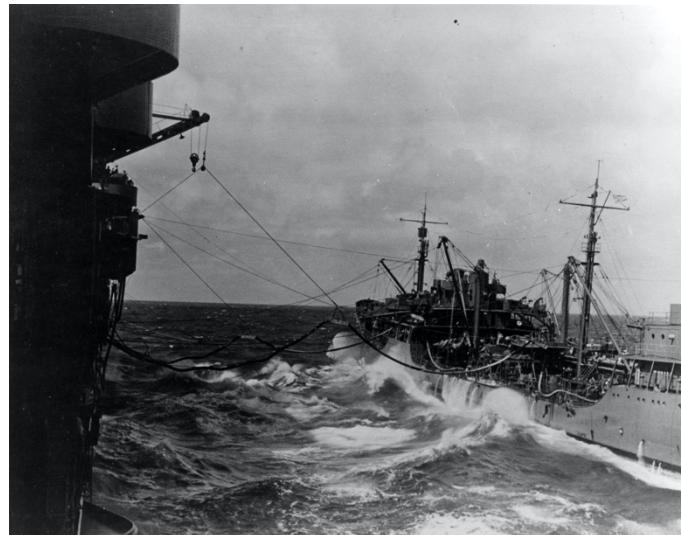
After making an "inexplicable" left turn ahead of carrier USS Wasp, Hobson was rammed, sliced in two, and sunk in less than four minutes by the carrier, with the loss of 176 crewmen including her commanding officer (61 survived). This remains the worst loss of life in the U.S. Navy since World War II, and the worst single-ship non-combat loss since collier USS Cyclops (Fuel Ship No. 4) and 306 personnel aboard disappeared without a trace in 1918.

The court of inquiry concluded "that the sole cause of the collision was the unexplained left turn made by Hobson about 2224. In making this left turn, the Commanding Officer committed a grave error in judgment." No one else was considered at fault and Wasp was absolved.

On 14 May 1952, an editorial appeared in the Wall Street Journal entitled "Hobson's Choice," which to this day is one of the best depictions of the U.S. Navy principle of accountability:

On the sea there is a tradition older even than the traditions of the country itself and wiser in its age than this new custom. It is the tradition that with responsibility goes authority and with them both goes accountability. This accountability is not for the intentions but for the deed.... It is cruel this accountability of good and well-intentioned men. But the choice is that or an end to responsibility and finally, as the cruel sea has taught, an end to the confidence and trust in the men who lead, for men will not long trust leaders who feel themselves beyond accountability for what they do. And when men lose confidence and trust in those who lead, order disintegrates into chaos and purposeful ships into floating derelicts.

For more detail on the sinking and battle history of Hobson, please see attachment H-071-1. For a list of other U.S. Navy surface ship accidents since World War II resulting in fatalities or loss of ship, please see attachment H-071-2.



USS Neosho (AO-23) refueling USS Yorktown (CV 5), 1 May 1942, shortly before the Battle of Coral Sea. Note use of Yorktown's aircraft crane to support her end of the refueling rig. Neosho was bombed by Japanese carrier planes on 7 May 1942 and scuttled on 11 May (80-G-464653).

80th Anniversary of World War II

Since I wrote extensively about World War II for the conflict's 75th anniversary, I will mostly just reference my previous work.

On 18 April 1942, 16 U.S. Army Air Force B-25 twin-engine bombers launched from aircraft carrier USS Hornet (CV-8) to conduct the first bombing of Japan since the attack on Pearl Harbor. For more on the raid, please see H-Gram 004.

On 7-8 May 1942, the Battle of the Coral Sea was the first naval battle in history in which opposing ships never sighted each other. It was also the first carrier versus carrier battle. The result was a tactical draw, but a strategic victory for the United States in that the Japanese were forced to call off their planned capture of Port Moresby, New Guinea. The cost was the U.S. carrier Lexington (CV-2), destroyer Sims (DD-409), and fleet oiler Neosho (AO-23) in exchange for Japanese light carrier Shoho and severe damage to carrier Shokaku (which would have profound

consequences). For more on the Battle of the Coral Sea please see H-Gram 005.

However, I am bringing forward the story of Lieutenant John Powers as an example of how one person's valor changed the course of the war. I have also added a new section with more detail on Neosho and Sims as examples of extraordinary valor under the worst conditions.

The Bomb That Changed the Course of the War

On 8 May 1942, 24 SBD Dauntless dive-bombers from USS Yorktown (CV-5) commenced an attack on Japanese fleet carrier IJN Shokaku in the Coral Sea. As each bomber nosed over in near-vertical dives from 18,000 feet on the wildly maneuvering Shokaku, their windscreens and bombsights fogged over so badly during the descent that the U.S. pilots were blinded and forced to release their bombs "by memory." Although one bomb hit the Shokaku near the bow and started a serious fire, other bombs missed. Finally, an SBD piloted by Lieutenant John Powers (USNA '35), his wing on fire after being hit by cannon fire from a Japanese Zero fighter, pressed his dive well below the standard minimum pull-up altitude.

Powers' bomb hit Shokaku nearly dead center and caused horrific and nearly fatal damage, starting massive fires and killing over 100 Japanese sailors. Unable to pull up in time, Powers flew through the frag pattern of his own bomb and crashed alongside the carrier.

Although 15 dive bombers off Lexington would later manage to hit Shokaku with one more bomb, it was Powers' bomb that

knocked the carrier out of action for the rest of the battle, leaving her unable to recover aircraft, and with damage so severe that she was unable to participate in the critical and decisive Battle of Midway one month later. Her presence could have easily turned that battle into a catastrophic defeat for the United States. By the sacrifice of his life and that of his radioman-gunner (Radioman Second Class Everett Clyde Hill), Powers quite likely prevented the loss of Yorktown during the Battle of the Coral Sea and changed the outcome of two of the most important battles of World War II. For his valor, Powers was awarded the Medal of Honor, posthumously. Hill's parents received his \$10,000 G.I. life insurance policy payout.

Forgotten Valor: The Sacrifices of USS Neosho and USS Sims

Of 40 Japanese torpedo bombers that attacked Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, not one thought that the tanker Neosho was worth expending a torpedo on. Neosho was actually a national strategic asset: she was much bigger and faster than other oilers, and she was equipped with the new capability to conduct underway alongside refueling at sea. Sitting at the gasoline pier among the battleships on the east side of Ford Island, Neosho was also literally a giant bomb waiting to go off, with devastating consequences had she been hit by a torpedo or bomb. Despite torpedoes, bombs, and strafing all around, the skipper of Neosho, Commander John S. Phillips got his 513-foot ship underway without the aid of tugs and moved her across the harbor during the attack to a comparatively safe location, shooting down a Japanese plane along the way, a feat of

coolness and courage under fire that resulted in a Navy Cross.

Five months later, at the Battle of the Coral Sea, Neosho's charmed streak ended. Based on an erroneous sighting report, the two Japanese carriers launched a 78-plane strike at what they thought was a U.S. aircraft carrier, only to find Neosho and her lone escort, destroyer USS Sims in what the U.S. thought to be a safer area. Discovering their error, the Japanese sent the torpedo bombers back to the carrier, but at least 24 Val dive bombers rolled in on Neosho and Sims. The ships put up a valiant fight, downing three aircraft and damaging at least four more, although in an amazing feat of airmanship one Japanese pilot crashed his crippled aircraft onto Neosho.

Sims was hit by four bombs in quick succession and buckled amidships. She went down quickly, with her guns blazing, and her skipper and crew still trying to save her, but underwater explosions killed almost all of them. Twenty survivors on a raft were never seen again, but 15 in a whaleboat made it to Neosho (two later died).

The maneuverability of twin-screw Neosho and her heavy volume of anti-aircraft fire caused the first two waves of dive bombers all to miss. The third wave changed tactics and attacked from multiple directions simultaneously; the result was seven direct hits, crippling the ship, leaving her dead in the water, on fire, and listing heavily. Some of the crew panicked, while many others misinterpreted the order to make preparations to abandon ship as an order to do so. Almost two thirds of the crew, and all the rafts and two of the boats, went over the side despite Captain Phillips' attempts to order them back.

The situation was precarious, but Neosho stubbornly remained afloat, although riding ever lower in the water. At the end of the first day, 158 of Neosho's crew were unaccounted for, most of them probably on seven overcrowded rafts. Only two of the men on the rafts would ultimately survive a nightmarish nine days adrift. In addition, Neosho's last radio message contained an error by the ship's navigator, which threw the searchers off.

By the third day, Phillips determined that the ship could not remain afloat much longer, so he ordered the four remaining boats and a number of makeshift rafts prepared with provisions and jury-rigged sails, with the intent to set sail for Australia the next day. Neosho was finally sighted by a U.S. PBY flying boat on 11 May as the boats were being manned. The PBY directed destroyer Henley (DD-391) to the scene to rescue 123 survivors, several of whom subsequently died from their wounds. Even then, it took two torpedoes and 146 rounds of 5-inch gunfire to finally put Neosho under.

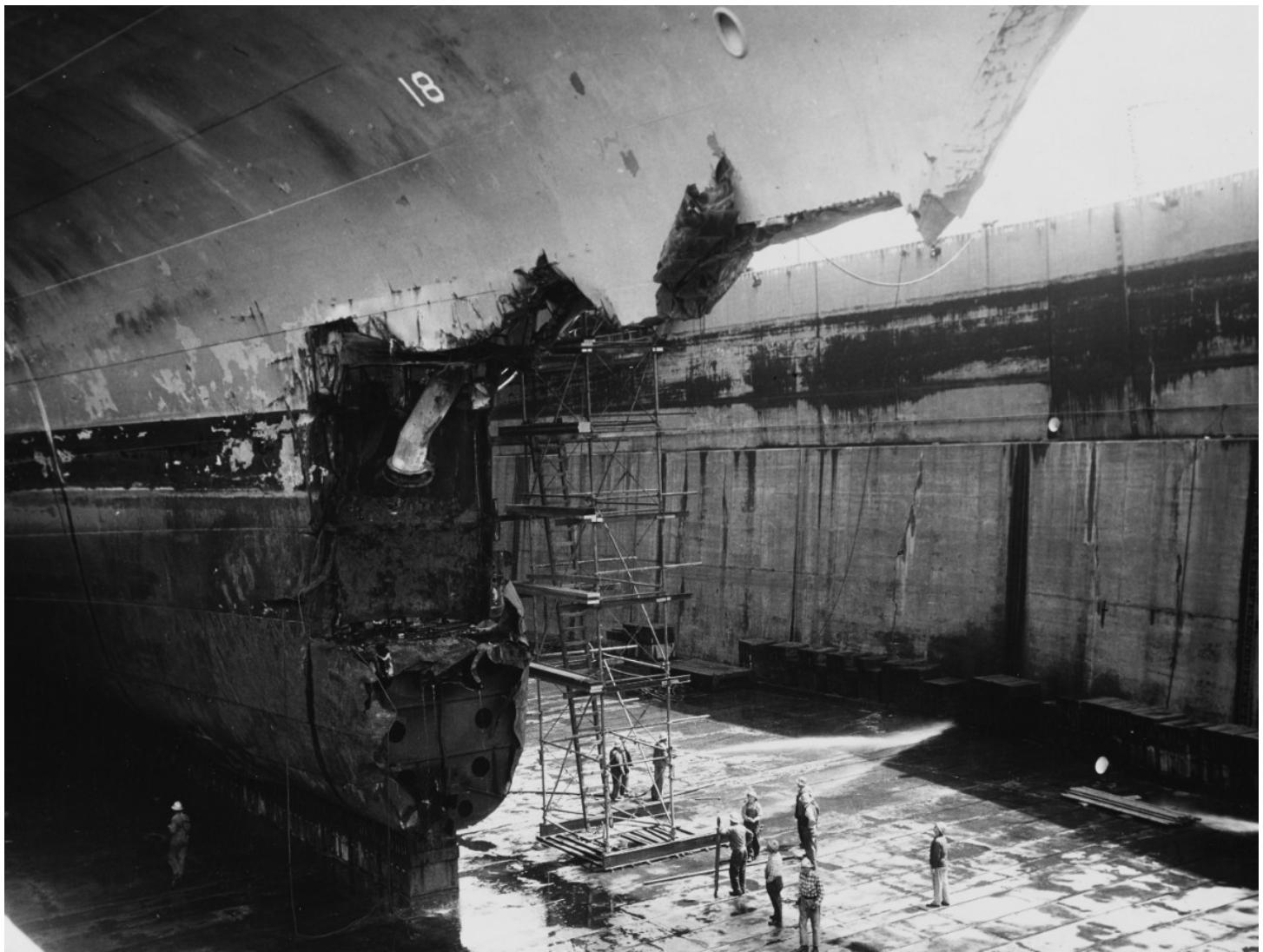
Of Neosho's crew, Chief Watertender Oscar Peterson was awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor. Pharmacist's Mate Third Class Henry Tucker was awarded a posthumous Navy Cross, and Neosho's gunnery officer, Lieutenant Commander Thomas M. Brown, lived to receive a Navy Cross. Four Silver Stars were awarded, one to Captain Phillips. The commanding officer of Sims, Lieutenant Commander Wilford Hyman, was awarded a posthumous Navy Cross.

The toll was high. Of Sims' crew of 252, only 13 ultimately survived. Of Neosho's crew of 287, only 102 survived (all five passengers survived as well). Navy historian Rear Admiral

Samuel Eliot Morison would later assess that Neosho and Sims did not go down in vain. Had the Japanese 78-plane strike (with all their torpedo bombers still intact) struck Yorktown and Lexington during the period they were most vulnerable, the Battle of the Coral Sea could have ended as a devastating defeat for the United States.

For more on this extraordinary story of courage amid tragedy, please see attachment H-071-3.

All previous H-grams may be found here [<https://www.history.navy.mil/about-us/leadership/director/directors-corner/h-grams.html>].



USS *Wasp* (CV-18) in dry dock after its 26 April 1952 collision with USS *Hobson* (DMS-26) (NHHC NH-97512).

H-071-1: Loss of USS *Hobson* (DMS-26)

H-Gram 071, Attachment 1
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC
May 2022

On the night of 26 April 1952, *Hobson* (DMS-26) was under the command of Lieutenant Commander William James Tierney, the destroyer's eighth commanding officer. Tierney had previous command of a fast destroyer transport (APD), but had only been

in command of *Hobson* for just over five weeks, only seven days underway and three and a half days with the *Wasp* (CV-18) task group.

Except where noted, the following account is directly from *Pertinent Extracts of the Findings of Court of Inquiry, Collision of USS WASP and USS HOBSON of CNO Third Endorsement* dated [redacted] December 1952 (The current Chief of Naval Operations [CNO] was Admiral William M. Fechteler):

On the night of 26 April 1952, the U.S.S. WASP (CV-18) was operating as a Carrier Unit with two destroyer-

minesweepers acting as plane guards, the U.S.S. RODMAN (DMS-21) and the U.S.S. HOBSON (DMS-26). The Commanding Officer of the WASP, Captain Burnham C. McCaffree, was the Officer in Tactical Command. The WASP launched a group of aircraft about 2000 and directed it to conduct a simulated attack on the remainder of the naval task group enroute to the Mediterranean, approximately 50 miles to the South. The night was clear but dark, there was no moon, the sea was slight and the wind was 7-10 knots from 240°T [true bearing]. The ships were in Latitude 42°21' North, Longitude 44°15' West, [about 490 NM southeast of St. John's Newfoundland] in 2700 fathoms of waters (about 3 miles). The three ships in the unit were in darkened condition except for red aircraft warning lights on top of the masts which were clearly visible to all the ships.

After the night launch the task unit was turned to course 102°T. The HOBSON was then bearing 245°T, distance 3000 yards from the WASP, and the RODMAN was bearing 090°T, distance 1000 yards from the WASP. Speed was 25 knots.

The Commanding Officer of WASP had a message sent at 2210 informing the plane guards that the probable recovery course for the returning aircraft would be 265°T and that the recovery speed would be 27 knots. Both plane guards received this message. For the WASP and RODMAN the change to the recovery course and speed would be simply a change of

course and speed; however, the HOBSON, in addition to the change on course and speed, would have to adjust her present position of 245°T, distance 3000 yards from WASP to a position 175°T-185°T, distance 1000 yards from the WASP. Such a change in position is standard practice for naval ships operating with a carrier task unit. The Commanding Officer of the HOBSON, Lieutenant Commander William J. Tierney, discussed the evolution with the Officer of the Deck and indicated his intention to arrive on his new plane guard station by changing course to 130°T and, when the WASP bore about 010°T, to make a left turn to the recovery course. The Officer of the Deck, who had previously proposed a right turn and slowing down to 15 knots to fall into position, objected to this plan on the basis that a left turn to the recovery course was dangerous. Lieutenant Commander Tierney stated since the maneuver had to be expedited, that he would conn (personally direct course and speed changes) the HOBSON into its new position.

Note: Witness accounts state that the officer of the deck (who also had the Conn) was the Hobson's executive officer, Lieutenant William A. Hoefer, who had been aboard for 16 months. The discussion between Hoefer and Tierney was so heated that Hoefer turned over the deck and the conn to Lieutenant Donald Cummings in order to continue the argument. When Tierney did not budge, Hoefer went out onto a bridge wing to cool off.

At about 2221 a signal to change course to 260°T and to change speed to 27 knots was properly made and executed. Both plane guards received the signal. The five degree variation between the probable recovery course and the course actually ordered would not appreciably change the planned maneuvers of the HOBSON. The position of the WASP and HOBSON at the time this signal was executed is shown on the attached chart.

The WASP made a normal turn to the right from 102°T to 260°T, successive positions being as indicated on the attached chart. The RODMAN had merely to maintain her approximate true bearing and distance from the WASP so turned simultaneously with the carrier. On the execution of the signal, the Commanding Officer of the HOBSON took the conn as prearranged with the officer of the deck and proceeded to change course and simultaneously to adjust his position. The HOBSON first turned right to 130°T and increased speed to 27 knots. After about two minutes, or at 2223 as noted on the chart and well before the WASP bore 010°T, the HOBSON came left to an average course of about 090°T which she held until the distance to the WASP had closed to about 1240 yards. The next move of HOBSON at 2224, directed by her Commanding Officer, was an inexplicable turn to the left using standard rudder. The Commanding Officer apparently soon realized that he was crossing the bow of the WASP and was in an extremely dangerous position, so he attempted to extricate his ship by increasing his

rudder to full left, followed by hard left and emergency flank speed ahead.

Note: There is conflicting witness testimony in the record as to whether Tierney ordered a hard right turn just after the standard left turn suggesting he may have intended to conduct a Williamson turn, however if so, he told no one of his intent. At this point, Hoefer, the executive officer, came off the bridge wing warning, "Prepare for Collision!" multiple times. There was one minute and ten seconds between the time Tierney gave the first left turn order and impact.

The Commanding Officer of the WASP ordered an adjustment of the recovery course to 250°T, about the same time that the Commanding Officer of HOBSON ordered his final left turn. The heading of the WASP was then 258°T, having almost reached the prescribed course of 260°T. The Commanding Officer of the WASP personally transmitted the adjustment signal; however, as none of the bridge personnel of the RODMAN nor any survivors of the HOBSON heard the signal, the court was of the opinion that the Commanding Officer of the HOBSON also did not receive the signal. Since the HOBSON had already commenced her turn to the left, the signal, even if it had been received by the Commanding Officer, would not, at this time, have affected his manner of executing the evolution.

Almost immediately after the order was given to the WASP's helmsman to make the 10° adjustment of course to the left, the Commanding Officer and Officer of the Deck of WASP noted the final left

turn of the HOBSON. Captain [redacted] assumed the conn with a quick and correct order to the engines to "back emergency full speed."

Note: The WASP's officer of the deck, Lieutenant Robert Herbst, called out "we're in trouble" to his commanding officer, Captain Burnham C. McCaffree, when he saw Hobson's turn.

The combination of the HOBSON's efforts to increase both speed and rate of turn and the WASP's efforts to back emergency was not sufficient to avoid the collision and about 10 seconds after 2225 the WASP, which had swung to heading about 260°T and returned to heading 258°T, struck the starboard side of the HOBSON almost amidship at approximately a 90° angle and penetrated at least two-thirds through. The HOBSON broke in two, the forward section remaining afloat for about four minutes and the stern section sinking immediately. At the moment of impact the WASP was still making about 22 knots through the water although the engine speed had been slowed from 27 knots to about 7 knots. The emergency backing of WASP's engines, combined with the resistance offered by the hull of the HOBSON, brought the WASP dead in the water while the HOBSON's forward section was still close to the starboard bow of the WASP.

Note: The force of the impact rolled Hobson onto its port side. The aft half went under almost immediately, although 40 men managed to escape, some literally shot out of a scuttle by force of water pressure. The

forward section remained entangled with Wasp for several minutes before sinking. One chief on Hobson was able to grab a pipe on Wasp and get aboard without going in the water. Everyone else was not so lucky, as survivors wound up in cold thick gelatinous goo of fuel oil. A pair of life rafts dropped from Wasp landed on a clump of five men, probably killing them as they were not seen again.

Search and rescue operations were commenced immediately by the WASP. The ship was lighted; searchlights were turned on; life rafts, life jackets, and other flotation gear were dropped in the water; eight boats were lowered into the water; recovery lines were put over from the flight deck to the water; and the deck edge elevator was lowered. The RODMAN closed the scene expeditiously, lowering her only boat. Three destroyers from the task group to the South joined rescue operations at 0015 on April 27 and the WASP temporarily ceased rescue operations long enough to recover her planes which by this time were very low on fuel. Thorough search and rescue operations were continued until 0730, April 27, when it was considered that no further possibility existed of finding additional survivors. Of the 237 officers and men aboard the HOBSON at the time of the collision, 176 lost their lives as a result of the collision and 61 survived the disaster. Following the collision, Lieutenant Commander Tierney was seen going in the water from the port side of the bridge and after three or four seconds was not seen again. There were no deaths or

injuries to any personnel aboard the WASP.

Note: There are conflicting witness statements on how Lieutenant Commander Tierney went in the water. One account is that he dove toward the *Wasp* just before impact; either way, he could not swim and was not seen again.

The HOBSON was a total loss including all log books and records (a fact which, coupled with the death of the Commanding Officer, made the investigation more difficult), publications, equipment and other material aboard. The WASP received considerable damage to the bow section which has now been repaired.

After carefully weighing the testimony presented, the opinion of the Court, which has been approved by the Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Atlantic Fleet, is that the sole cause of the collision was the unexplained left turn made by the HOBSON about 2224. In making this left turn the Commanding Officer committed a grave error in judgment. As the Commanding Officer was not among the survivors his reasons for turning left will never be known. However three possible explanations for his actions are as follows:

1. *He became completely confused and having lost the tactical picture, mistakenly continued to believe that he could turn left into position and so ordered "left rudder."*

2. *He decided against his planned final left turn after he started the evolution but told no one of his decision and inadvertently ordered "left rudder" when he meant "right rudder" which, in fact, would have placed him near his intended position.*
3. *He made an error in judging his position relative to the WASP which, as noted was darkened except for the red aircraft warning lights and, thinking he was on WASP's starboard bow, when he was in fact on the port bow, turned left to avoid crossing ahead.*

Note: Commander in Chief, U.S. Atlantic Fleet was Admiral Lynde D. McCormick.

No other person is considered responsible for the collision. The Commanding Officer of the WASP handled his ship properly and when he sighted the HOBSON making her final left turn and took quick and proper action. His seamanship after the collision in carrying out search and rescue operations, in recovery of planes with comparatively low wind conditions across the fight deck and in bringing his damaged ship safely into port was of the highest order.

The condition of the material readiness of the WASP and HOBSON was good. No material, mechanical or electronic failure in either ship contributed to or caused the collision.

Note: *Wasp's surface search radar failed just as the ship began the turn into the wind. The*

port pelorus on *Hobson* fogged, so an accurate bearing to *Wasp* was not possible. The court concluded neither of these made a difference.

The gash in *Wasp*'s bow was 90-feet long and 15-feet deep. After the collision, *Wasp* was able to make about 10 knots, just enough to bring the ten aircraft in the air aboard. However, *Wasp* had to back its way 1,200 miles to port for repair, occasionally becoming uncontrollable with 600 feet of anchor chain and an 81 foot piece of hull plating hanging below. Entering dry dock at Bayonne New Jersey, WASP's bow was replaced by that taken from *Hornet* (CV-12), then undergoing major conversion. *Wasp* was repaired in ten days and resumed its transit to the Mediterranean.

The Court of Inquiry was actually not unanimous in their conclusions, with a number of majority and minority opinions throughout, mostly about whether or how much blame should be ascribed to the *Wasp* or the executive officer of *Hobson*. The inquiry noted a number of watch-standing deficiencies and complacency aboard *Wasp* (and although Captain McCaffree was absolved of blame, he was only one of two skippers of *Wasp* [when the ship was not in reserve] not to make flag during that era). Two experienced destroyer skippers testified that it was the *Wasp*'s changing course right up until impact that was a significant cause; were it not for that, they argued, *Hobson* would have made it. The majority disagreed.

This was the sad end of a gallant ship that served with valor and distinction throughout World War II.

History of USS Hobson (DD-464/DMS-26)

Namesake



Lieutenant Richmond Pearson Hobson, photograph, 1898 (NHHC NH-127).

The destroyer *Hobson* (DD-464) was named after Richmond Pearson Hobson, U.S. Naval Academy graduate, class of 1889, and Medal of Honor recipient for heroism in the Spanish-American War. On the night of 2-3 June 1898, the old collier *Merrimac*, under the command of Lieutenant Hobson and with a volunteer crew of seven, steamed into the entrance to Santiago de Cuba. Following orders from Rear Admiral William T. Sampson, Hobson and his crew attempted to scuttle *Merrimac* in the channel to block the Spanish squadron in port. However, alert Spanish shore batteries opened heavy fire and disabled *Merrimac*'s steering gear, leaving the ship and its crew adrift in the channel until the collier came in range of the Spanish ships in the harbor. These shelled *Merrimac* before it sunk, probably by a

torpedo fired from *Pluton*. Unfortunately, *Merrimac* did not sink in a spot that would effectively block the channel.

Somewhat miraculously, *Merrimac*'s entire crew survived. The commander of the Spanish squadron, Admiral Cervera Pascual, personally motored out in his launch and picked up Lieutenant Hobson and his crew and treated them with great chivalry. While the Spanish held the crew as prisoners of war, U.S. newspapers wrote about the ship's "suicide mission"; the men were idolized as national heroes before they even went home to a rock-star welcome when they were released after the Battle of Santiago.

All seven *Merrimac* crewmen were awarded the Medal of Honor—the only case I know of in which the entire crew of a ship received the medal. At the time, naval officers were not eligible to receive the Medal of Honor, so Hobson was not awarded one until 1933 by retroactive act of Congress (which also made him a rear admiral in retired status) and presented by President Franklin Roosevelt.

In the aftermath of the Spanish-American war, Hobson's hero status rivaled that of Admiral Dewey, victor of the battle of Manila Bay; Hobson dined with President William McKinley and was swamped with speaking engagements, and he became known as "the most kissed man in America" as ladies everywhere literally swooned.

Hobson would go on to a political career as a U.S. congressman from Alabama, where he would be the only congressman from the South to vote for the women's suffrage amendment of 1915 (which did not pass), and he would later become known as the "Father of American Prohibition." In fact he had been

ostracized by his classmates at U.S. Naval Academy (USNA) because of his total refusal to drink alcohol or smoke tobacco, yet finished first in his class. He was also close friends with inventor Nikola Tesla, who was the best man at Hobson's wedding.

The Ship



USS *Hobson* (DD-464), photographed off Charleston, South Carolina, 4 March 1942 (NHHC NH-53548).

Hobson was one of 66 *Gleaves*-class destroyers, authorized and laid-down as part of a belated pre-World War II U.S. naval build-up. The design of the *Gleaves*-class destroyers preceded the more numerous *Fletcher*-class destroyers, but both classes were built concurrently, all being commissioned after the start of the war. *Hobson* was laid down at the Charleston Navy Yard in South Carolina on 11 November 1940. It was launched on 8 September 1941, sponsored by Hobson's widow, Grizelda. *Hobson* was commissioned on 22 January 1942.

Hobson was 348-feet long and displaced 1,630 tons. The destroyer had four boilers and two shafts and was capable of 37.5 knots. Sources conflict on its initial armament (which varied amongst the *Gleaves*-class), but its main armament consisted of four single 5-inch guns and two quintuple 21-inch torpedo tube launchers. It also had two depth charge

racks. Its antiaircraft armament was upgraded to two twin 40mm guns and 7 20mm guns, plus it was fitted with four or six K-gun side-throwing depth charge launchers.

Under the command of Lieutenant Commander Kenneth Loveland (USNA '33), *Hobson* was assigned to Destroyer Division 20 (DesDiv 20) in Destroyer Squadron 10 (DesRon 10). After shakedown and training in Casco Bay, Maine, *Hobson* arrived at Norfolk on 1 June 1942. The ship spent the next four months screening the aircraft carrier *Ranger* (CV-4) for convoy escort operations along the U.S. East Coast and Caribbean to the Panama Canal.

Operation Torch—The Invasion of North Africa—November 1942



A destroyer passes astern of *Ranger*, 8 November 1942 (National Archives, NHHC 80-G-30232).

DesDiv 20, under the command of Captain James L. Holloway, Jr. (future four-star and father of CNO James L. Holloway III), was assigned to screen *Ranger*, escort carrier *Sewanee* (CVE-27), and light cruiser *Cleveland* (CL-55) for the Atlantic transit and invasion of Vichy French North Africa. During the Naval Battle of Casablanca on 8–10 November, the Vichy French resisted. *Hobson*

and other DesDiv 20 destroyers protected *Ranger* from attacks by French submarines; four torpedoes from *Le Tonnant* missed astern *Ranger*, but prompt counterattack by DesDiv 20 destroyers *Ellyson* (DD-454) and *Hobson* prevented the submarine from getting closer.

For more on Operation Torch, see H-013-4 *Forgotten Valor—Operation Torch*.

Atlantic Convoy Operations—1943

After the success of Operation Torch, *Hobson* returned to the East Coast for more convoy escort duty. On 2 March 1943, *Hobson* rescued 45 survivors of the British cargo ship SS *St. Margaret*, which had been sunk by German submarine *U-66* four days previously. The survivors had rigged one life boat with a sail, with 35 men aboard and towing a raft with ten more aboard, and had sailed over 90 miles from the point of sinking. *Hobson* disembarked the survivors in Bermuda. Beginning in April 1943, *Hobson* operated out of Argentia, Newfoundland and in July 1943 escorted a convoy taking British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to the Quebec Conference.

Operation Leader—Air Attack on German-Occupied Norway—December 1943

On 4 August 1943, *Hobson* sailed with *Ranger* to operate out of Scapa Flow with the British Home Fleet, guarding against a potential foray by German battleship *Tirpitz*. *Hobson* was inspected by Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox and Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Europe, Admiral Harold R. Stark. In October 1943, a U.S. Task Force under the command of Rear Admiral Olaf M. Hustvedt,

with *Ranger*, heavy cruiser *Tuscaloosa* (CA-37) and DesDiv 20, departed Scapa Flow to launch an air-strike on German-occupied Norway, designated Operation Leader. On 4 October, aircraft from *Ranger* struck Bodo (just north of the Arctic Circle) and Sandnessjøen, sinking or beaching five German (or German-controlled) tanker and cargo ships and damaging another seven, catching the Germans completely by surprise. Two German aircraft were shot down while trying to find *Ranger*, 1.5 of them by Lieutenant (j.g) Dean "Diz" Laird, who would go on to be the only U.S. Navy ace to shoot down German and Japanese aircraft.

For more information, see H-022-3—Operation Leader.

Bogue Hunter-Killer Group—March 1944



German submarine *U-575* under attack by aircraft from *Bogue* (CVE-9), 13 March 1944 (National Archives, NHHC 80-G-221467).

In March 1944, *Hobson* joined ASW ("Hunter-Killer") Task Group 21.11 centered on escort carrier *Bogue* (CVE-9). The Task Group caught up with U-575, which had sunk British Corvette HMS *Asphodel* on 10 March (and nine cargo ships on nine previous patrols). Lookouts on the destroyers sighted an oil slick that led to a sonar contact and U-575 was depth-charged to the surface by *Hobson*. Allied units then swarmed the U-boat, which was sunk by the combined gunfire of *Hobson*, *Haverfield* (DE-393), Canadian frigate HMCS *Prince Rupert*, along with depth bombs from an Avenger of VC-95 off *Bogue* and a British RAF B-17 Flying Fortress. Somewhat amazingly, 37 of U-575's crew of 55 survived the onslaught. *Hobson* would share in the Presidential Unit Citation awarded to the *Bogue* Hunter-Killer Group. Commander Loveland would be awarded a Legion of Merit with Combat "V" for the action.

For more about Hunter-Killer action, see H-Gram 064 Close Quarters ASW.

Operation Neptune—D-Day Landings on 6 June 1944

On 21 April 1944, *Hobson* and DesDiv 20 departed Norfolk to participate in Operation Neptune, the naval part of the Operation Overlord "D-Day" landings in Normandy, France. *Hobson* was assigned to the Utah Beach assault group under Rear Admiral Don P. Moon, as part of Bombardment Group 125.8, which included battleship *Nevada* (BB-36), heavy cruisers *Tuscaloosa* and *Quincy* (CA-71), British light cruiser HMS *Black Prince* (81), monitor HMS *Erebus* (I02), ten U.S. destroyers, four British destroyers, and a Dutch gunboat. *Hobson* initially screened Rear Admiral Moon's flagship *Bayfield* (APA-

33). *Hobson*, along with *Corry* (DD-463) and *Fitch* (DD-462) then led the first waves of landing boats through the swept channel before taking up fire support positions off Utah Beach.

At 0530 on 6 June, German shore batteries opened fire. The order for the destroyers to counter-fire was given at 0536, 14 minutes ahead of schedule. *Hobson* fired on multiple key German positions in order to protect the landing craft as they hit the beach. When *Corry* was hit and sunk by a German 8.25-inch shore battery, *Hobson* moved into *Corry*'s position to continue shelling the German position. *Corry* suffered 24 killed and 60 wounded, and was the most significant U.S. Navy ship loss on D-Day (although other ships would be lost in the week that followed).



The deck of *Hobson* (DD-464) after the invasion off Utah Beach, 6 June 1944 (NHHC NH 53550).

Naval Battle of Cherbourg—25 June 1944

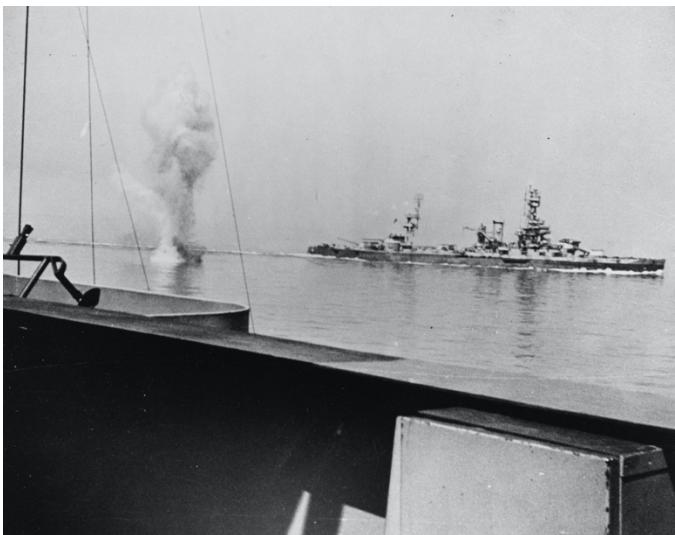
Following the D-Day landings, the Allied advance on the critical port of Cherbourg stalled due to stout German defenses, despite being cut off from the rest of France. This was giving the Germans time to destroy the port facilities that would be needed to support any Allied advance across France. A

naval task force was formed to provide heavy gunfire support to an all-out assault on Cherbourg from landward by three U.S. Army infantry divisions. Cherbourg was heavily defended from the sea by numerous concealed and hardened gun positions. In complete violation of Lord Nelson's dictum, "a ship's a fool that fights a fort," the Allies planned to do exactly that.

Combined Task Force 129 was under the overall command of Rear Admiral Morton Deyo, who also commanded Battle Group 1. It consisted of battleship *Nevada*, heavy cruisers *Tuscaloosa* and *Quincy*, light British cruisers HMS *Glasgow* and HMS *Enterprise*, and six U.S. destroyers. Battle Group 1's mission was to shell German-occupied Cherbourg, the inner harbor forts and positions to the west.

Battle Group 2 was commanded by Rear Admiral Carleton F. Bryant. The group included battleships *Texas* (BB-35), and *Arkansas* (BB-33) and five U.S. destroyers including *Hobson*. (It also included *Laffey* (DD-724, later known as "the ship that would not die" after multiple kamikaze hits, as well as *O'Brien* [DD-725], commanded by Commander William Outerbridge who had fired the first shot of the Pacific war in command of *Ward* [DD-139] sinking a Japanese midget submarine just before the attack on Pearl Harbor).

Battle Group 2's mission was to take out the most powerful German strong point defending Cherbourg, Battery Hamburg. Situated on high ground, Battery Hamburg's 11-inch guns could out-range the 14-inch guns on *Texas* and *Arkansas*.



German artillery shell falls between *Texas* (BB-35), in the background, and *Arkansas* (BB-33), during the U.S. bombardment of Cherbourg, France, 25 June 1944(National Archives, NHHC-80-G-244210).

The battle commenced at 0950 on 25 June 1944 and lasted until 1500 as the battleships and the fort engaged in a heavy gunnery duel. *Texas* was hit by an 11-inch shell, and three destroyers were hit by duds. The U.S. ships were repeatedly bracketed and German fire appeared to be highly accurate within 15,000 yards but was concentrated on the battleships. *Hobson* and other destroyers maneuvered close enough to hit targets 2,000 yards inland, which proved highly beneficial to the advancing U.S. infantry. By the end of the battle, gunfire from the U.S. and British ships had disabled 22 of 24 targets, but with no certainty the heavily casemated gun positions were permanently out of action (once captured by the U.S., it was later determined that most of the damaged guns were no longer serviceable). Cherbourg quickly fell after this action.

Commander Loveland would be awarded a Silver Star for his actions at Normandy and Cherbourg. The citation provided a description of the action at Cherbourg:

Maneuvering his ship through heavily mined waters under severe and accurately controlled gunfire to protect vessels of the Western Task Force Area from enemy surface forces and submarines, Commander Loveland drove his ship through heavy gunfire on two occasions to lay a protecting smoke screen inshore of the capital ships and by splendid ship-handling and smoke laying, saved the heavy ships from possible serious damage or possible loss.

Operation Dragoon—Invasion of Southern France—15 August 1944

Following the D-Day landings in Normandy, many of the U.S. ships involved proceeded to the Mediterranean for landings in the Southern France, termed Operation Dragoon. Three beaches were selected between Hyeres and Cannes, designated west-to-east: Alpha, Delta, and Camel. The Delta Assault Force, under Rear Admiral Bertram Rogers included: the gunfire support group, TG 85.12, under the command of Rear Admiral Bryant; battleships *Texas* and *Nevada*; light cruiser *Philadelphia* (CL-41); Free-French light cruisers *George Leygues* and *Montcalm*; eight destroyers of DesRon 10 (including *Hobson*); four Free-French destroyers; and other smaller gun vessels.

At H-hour (hour of initiation) 0800 on 15 August, *Hobson* provided spotting services for *Nevada* and then provided direct fire support to troops going ashore. In 15 minutes, the shore defenses were destroyed and the troops landed at Delta Beach (near Saint-Tropez) with minimal opposition. Following the successful landing, *Hobson* resumed Mediterranean escort duty.

On 2 October 1944, *Hobson* was departing the French port of Marseilles before dawn and into the teeth of a fierce gale. Lookouts sighted the Liberty Ship SS *Johns Hopkins* in distress. *Johns Hopkins* had arrived from Oran, Algeria with 600 U.S. troops on board when the vessel was blown into an unswept mine area and struck a mine. Despite the mine danger, *Hobson* made multiple attempts to come alongside *Johns Hopkins* to take off the troops, but waves battered the two ships together. Only superb ship-handling by Commander Loveland prevented serious damage. Finally, *Hobson* stood nearby as the ships drifted 13 miles through unswept waters until daybreak to rescue survivors, in case *Johns Hopkins* sank. Fortunately, *Johns Hopkins* stayed afloat and a tug towed the vessel into Marseilles. Commander Loveland was awarded a Navy and Marine Corps Medal for this action.

Destroyer-Minesweeper Conversion—October 1944

With the European naval war winding down, the eight remaining destroyers of DesRon 10 returned to the U.S. in October 1944 where all underwent conversion to a destroyer-minesweeper configuration. This involved removal of the aftermost 5-inch turret (Mount 54) and replacing it with gear for sweeping acoustic mines. *Hobson* was redesignated as DMS-26. Under a new commanding officer, Commander Joseph I. Manning (USNA '33), *Hobson* transferred to the Pacific as part of Mine Squadron 20 (MinRon 20) via the Panama Canal, arriving at Pearl Harbor on 11 February, before proceeding via Eniwetok to Ulithi Atoll to stage for the invasion of Okinawa.

Operation Iceberg—Invasion of Okinawa—April 1945



Aerial view of Ulithi Harbor full of U.S. ships waiting to depart for Okinawa, March 1945 (National Archives 148728652).

On 19 March 1945, ten destroyer minesweepers of MinRon 20 departed Ulithi and made a direct transit to Okinawa, arriving before the main force. As it turned out, the destroyer-minesweepers provided protection to regular minesweepers and for the most part were used as regular destroyers. *Hobson* was paired with *Emmons* (DMS-22) on radar picket duty, before *Hobson* assumed fire support duty providing night illumination to troops ashore on Okinawa. (*Emmons* was sunk on 6 April 1945 after being hit by five kamikaze aircraft.)

On 13 April 1945, *Hobson* was reassigned to radar picket duty to replace destroyer *Mannert L. Abele*, the first ship sunk by an Ohka "Cherry Blossom" rocket-assisted manned kamikaze bomb the previous night (84 dead and over 30 wounded), on a picket station 75 NM (nautical miles) northwest of Okinawa. With *Hobson* were destroyer *Pringle* (DD-477) and two landing craft infantry (LCI) intended to provide additional antiaircraft support to the radar picket ships, but grimly known as "pall bearers."

At 0500 on 16 April, lookouts on *Hobson* sighted 15 Japanese aircraft on an incoming raid. Initially driven off by antiaircraft fire, the Japanese planes continued to circle until 0853 when one plane dove on *Pringle*. The kamikaze was shot down by the combined gunfire of *Hobson* and *Pringle*. Another kamikaze was downed by *Pringle*. However at 0920, one kamikaze made it through the antiaircraft barrage and struck *Pringle* in the bridge. The plane crashed through the superstructure to the deck abaft the forward stack. Either one 1,000-pound bomb or two 500-pound bombs penetrated deep into the engineering spaces resulting in a massive explosion that broke *Pringle* in two, sinking the destroyer in under six minutes.

At about 0922, another kamikaze dove on *Hobson* from the starboard side. The plane was blown apart by a 5-inch shell from *Hobson*, but a 250-pound delayed action bomb from the plane hit the deckhouse, starting fires in the gunnery workshop, machine shop and electrical shop, blowing a hole in the deck over the forward engine room, mangling steam and power lines. While *Hobson*'s damage control teams fought the fires, the gunners downed two more kamikazes making a run on the ship while an LCI shot down a third. *Hobson*'s fires were out in 15 minutes and emergency power restored in 35 minutes. The ship's casualties were comparatively light with four men killed and eight wounded. *Hobson* then set about with the LCI's in rescuing survivors of *Pringle*, which suffered 62 dead. *Hobson* picked up 136 of *Pringle*'s 258 survivors (three later died of wounds).

For more on this phase of the Battle for Okinawa, see H-Gram 045—Okinawa Part 2.

Hobson made it to Kerama Retto (near Okinawa) under its own power for interim repairs, but damage was severe enough to require the ship to return stateside for repairs. With West Coast yards chock full of ships under repair, *Hobson* steamed all the way to Norfolk, via a number of interim stops, arriving on 15 June 1945. *Hobson* was still under repair when the war ended.

Commander Manning was awarded a Navy Cross for fighting and saving his ship. The ship's engineer officer, Lieutenant (j.g.) Martin J. Cavanaugh Jr., and Chief Machinist's Mate Howard B. Farris were awarded the Silver Star. The ship's executive officer, Lieutenant Robert Vogel, was awarded a Bronze Star. *Hobson* would be awarded six battle stars for its World War II service to go with the Presidential Unit Citation.

Unlike many such damaged ships that were scrapped or put in reserve at war's end, *Hobson*'s repairs were completed and the ship remained in service after the war. *Hobson*'s routine consisted of minesweeping and amphibious exercises along the East Coast until that fateful night in April 1952.

In 1954, the USS Hobson Memorial Society erected an obelisk of pink granite on the bank of the Cooper River in Charleston, South Carolina, with names engraved of the Sailors lost with the sinking of *Hobson*. Around the obelisk are 38 stones representing the 38 states that were home to the 176 Sailors who perished.

(Sources: NHHC Dictionary of American Fighting Ships [DANFS]; Judge Advocate General's Corps, U.S. Navy, Findings of U.S. Navy, Court of Inquiry into Collision of USS *Hobson* and USS *Wasp*; Michael Junge, "A

Tradition Older," Real Clear Defense, 19
February 2019.)



USS *Benevolence* sinking beneath the surface in San Francisco Bay, California, 25 August 1950 (U.S. Navy BUMED Library and Archives, BUMED-09-5061-4).

H-071-2: Navy Surface Ship Accidents Since World War II Resulting in Fatalities or Loss of Ship

H-Gram 071, Attachment 2
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC
May 2022

Note: This list does not include single-man overboards, nor does it include numerous accidents aboard aircraft carriers. The moral of this story is that despite recent accidents, the Navy's current safety record is vastly better than it used to be.

Collisions

25 August 1950—*Benevolence* (AH-13)

After being brought out of reserve status due to the Korean War, while returning to San Francisco from a trial run in a dense fog, hospital ship *Benevolence* was struck by the merchant ship *Mary Luckenbach*.

Benevolence sank within 20 minutes, about 4 miles off the Golden Gate Bridge, with 23 dead (505 aboard were rescued).

14 May 1951—*Valcour* (AVP-55)

While passing the collier SS *Thomas Tracy* off Cape Henry, Virginia, seaplane tender *Valcour* suffered a power failure and steering casualty,

veering into the path of the collier, which rammed *Valcour*'s starboard side. Due to a ruptured aviation fuel tank, an intense fire broke out on *Valcour*, forcing many crew members to leap overboard. In addition to the raging fire, *Valcour* was taking on water and the commanding officer ordered abandon ship. Submarine rescue ship *Sunbird* (ASR-15) and U.S. Coast Guard tugboat *Cherokee* were subsequently able to bring the fire under control and save the ship, but 36 men were lost and 16 injured.

26 April 1952—Hobson (DMS-26)

See H-071-1.

11 March 1956—Columbus (CA-74) and Floyd B. Parks (DD-884)

Destroyer *Floyd B. Parks* collided with heavy cruiser *Columbus* off Luzon, Philippines. *Floyd B. Parks* lost 40 feet of her bow and two crew members. Good damage control saved the ship, and she went into Subic Bay under her own power for temporary repairs. Upon her return to Long Beach Naval Shipyard in May 1956, her damaged bow was replaced by that of *Lansdale* (an uncompleted destroyer). *Floyd B. Parks* went on to serve in the Vietnam War. Damage to *Columbus* was minimal.



Damage to the bow of *Floyd B. Parks* (DD-884) received in a collision with USS *Columbus* (CA-74) on 11 March 1956 (NHHC NH-79347).

5 March 1959—Kenneth D. Bailey (DD-713)

The Military Sea Transportation Service supply ship *Haiti Victory* collided with destroyer *Kenneth D. Bailey* in the Strait of Gibraltar. One crew member on the destroyer was killed and 24 injured, four seriously. *Kenneth D. Bailey* was repaired and made multiple Mediterranean deployments until she was sold to Iran for spare parts in 1975.

19 March 1960—Darby (DE-218)

While serving as a reserve training vessel, destroyer escort *Darby* collided with ore carrier SS *Soya Atlantic* while entering Chesapeake Bay en route to Little Creek, with two crew members killed and one seriously injured. The subsequent Coast Guard board of investigation determined the commanding officer and officer of the deck of *Darby* were responsible for the collision.

10 July 1960—Ammen (DD-527) and Collet (DD-730)



Collet (DD-730) in port following collision with *Ammen* (DD-527) (NHHC NH-105936).

Destroyer *Collet* collided with destroyer *Ammen* in dense fog off Newport Beach, California. The accident occurred while *Ammen* was in transit from Seal Beach to San

Diego to be decommissioned, killing 11 crew members and injuring 20 aboard *Ammen*. *Ammen* suffered extensive damage to the after deck house and below the waterline, but the crew controlled the flooding. *Ammen* was first towed to Long Beach and then to San Diego to complete decommissioning. *Collet* suffered a badly smashed bow, pretty much everything forward of the forward 5-inch gun mount, but suffered no deaths or serious injury.

Collet reached Long Beach under her own power. Upon reaching Long Beach Naval Shipyard, her bow was replaced by that of *Seaman*, an incomplete destroyer in the reserve fleet. *Collet* subsequently earned two battle stars in the Vietnam War before being sold to Argentina in 1974. As *Ara Piedra Bueno*, she was in company with light cruiser *Ara General Belgrano* (ex-*Phoenix*) when *Belgrano* was torpedoed and sunk by British submarine HMS *Conqueror* in the Falklands War.

27 August 1965—Newman K. Perry (DD-883) and Shangri-La (CVA-38)

While conducting exercises in the Tyrrhenian Sea, destroyer *Newman K. Perry* accidentally rammed carrier *Shangri-La*, holing the carrier below the waterline, which was quickly patched. The destroyer's bow was badly smashed forward of the No. 1 5-inch gun mount, with one crew member trapped in a crushed compartment, who subsequently died after extensive efforts to cut him free. Two other destroyer crew members were injured. *Newman K. Perry* was repaired and subsequently served in combat operations in Vietnam.

2 February 1967—McMorris (DE-1036)

During a night antisubmarine warfare exercise off Hawaii, gasoline tanker *Tombigbee* (AOG-11) rammed destroyer escort *McMorris*, penetrating to within a few feet of the keel, shearing off the step masthead and destroying four compartments on the main deck. Two crew members on *McMorris* were killed and seven injured. All communications and propulsion was lost. *McMorris* was towed to Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard and repaired.

3 June 1969—Frank E. Evans (DD-754)



On 2 June 1969, SH-3 helicopters from USS *Kearsarge* (CVS-33) join search-and-rescue operations over the stern section of USS *Frank E. Evans* (DD-754), as USS *Everett F. Larson* (DD-830) stands ready to offer assistance (right). A Royal Australian Navy frigate is also present (NHHC NH-98649).

At about 0300, destroyer *Frank E. Evans* was operating in a multinational formation of British, Australian, and New Zealand ships, centered on Australian aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne* in the South China Sea. As *Melbourne* was going to flight quarters, *Frank E. Evans*, on *Melbourne*'s port side, was ordered to take up plane guard position on *Melbourne*'s port quarter. As a result of confusion on the bridge of *Frank E. Evans*, the destroyer turned to starboard across *Melbourne*'s bow. Both ships took evasive action which however only resulted in placing the destroyer ahead of *Melbourne* again. The

destroyer was then struck amidships and cut completely in two. The forward half of the destroyer sank in less than five minutes along with 73 of her crew. The aft half of the destroyer remained afloat, scraping along the starboard side of *Melbourne* until the Australians could secure the section alongside, allowing the destroyer's crew to cross over. About 60 to 100 crew members were rescued from the water, including some by *Melbourne*'s crew. One body was recovered, for a total of 74 killed of *Frank E. Evans*'s 273 crew members. The stern section was towed to Subic Bay and later sunk as a target.

The joint U.S.-Australian board of inquiry proved to be quite contentious and would mark a low point in U.S. Navy-Royal Australian Navy relations due to U.S. efforts to place at least part of the blame on *Melbourne* while U.S. Navy officers conceded privately that *Evans* was wholly at fault. The commanding officer of *Melbourne* was acquitted at courts-martial. The two junior officers on the bridge of *Evans* at the time pleaded guilty to charges of dereliction of duty and negligence. The commanding officer of *Evans*, who was asleep at the time, pleaded not guilty, but was found guilty of dereliction of duty and negligently hazarding his ship. The training film, *I Believe You, Sir* (probably seen by all of us) was based on this collision.

Although *Frank E. Evans* had been operating in the Vietnam War zone prior to the collision and was scheduled to return to Vietnam upon conclusion of the multinational exercise, the collision took place just outside the designated zone, and the exercise was not deemed directly related to Vietnam operations. As a result, the lost crew members were deemed ineligible for

inclusion on the Vietnam Memorial Wall. Several attempts to rectify this have been unsuccessful (and it is actually quite complicated for a number of reasons, one of which is no room on the memorial).

22 November 1975—Belknap (CG-26) and John F. Kennedy (CV-67)



The damaged aircraft carrier *John F. Kennedy* (CV-67) in dry dock following collision with *Belknap* (CG-26) on 22 November 1975 (NARA 6420104).

At night in heavy seas off the coast of Sicily, confusion on the bridge of guided-missile cruiser *Belknap* resulted in a collision between *Belknap* and carrier *John F. Kennedy*. As *Belknap* scraped along *Kennedy*'s port side, ruptured JP-5 lines on *Kennedy* poured fuel onto *Belknap*, resulting in a fire on both ships. The fire on *Kennedy* was extinguished, with one squadron sailor killed by smoke inhalation. The fire on *Belknap* took hours to extinguish, complicated by *Belknap*'s aluminum superstructure. Most of the seven crew members killed on *Belknap* were trapped in engineering spaces below. Guided-missile destroyer *Claude V. Ricketts* (DDG-5) and destroyer *Bordelon* (DD-881) came alongside *Belknap* to assist in fighting the fire and were showered by debris when *Belknap*'s 3-inch

ready ammunition locker cooked off. The frigate *Pharris* (FF-1094) assisted in fighting the fire on *Kennedy*. *Belknap*'s superstructure burned almost completely to the main deck. In addition to the seven dead, 47 *Belknap* crew members were injured. *Belknap* was subsequently almost completely rebuilt, serving as the Sixth Fleet flagship in the late 1980s. *Bordelon* later collided with *Kennedy* while refueling on 22 November 1975; Although there were no fatalities, damage to *Bordelon* was severe enough that she was not repaired or returned to service.

28 August 1976—Voge (FF-1047)

Frigate *Voge* was tracking K-22, a Soviet Echo II-class nuclear guided-missile submarine, southwest of Crete when K-22 rammed *Voge* at 17 knots in the port quarter. The collision caused significant structural damage to the stern of *Voge*. The frigate was towed to Souda Bay, then to dry dock in Toulon, France, for repairs. The Soviet submarine was badly damaged but received emergency repairs at the Soviet Kithira anchorage. There were no fatalities (just an interesting event).

21 August 2017—John S. McCain (DDG-56)

Encountering steering control problems near the Strait of Malacca, *McCain* crossed ahead and was struck by Liberian-flagged tanker *Alnic MC* before dawn. Ten crew members on *McCain* died in a flooded berthing compartment. *McCain* was transported from Singapore via heavy-lift transport ship MV *Treasure*. After repairs were completed at Fleet Activities Yokosuka in October 2019, *McCain* returned to service.

Explosions/Fires



USS *Solar* (DE-221) following the explosion of forward magazine while at Naval Ammunition Depot, Earle, New Jersey, on 30 April 1946 (NHHC NH-104777).

30 April 1946—Solar (DE-221)

The destroyer escort *Solar* was destroyed in an ordnance accident and explosion at Naval Ammunition Depot, Earle, New Jersey, with seven killed and 30 injured.

7 October 1949—Chehalis (AOG-48)

Gasoline tanker *Chehalis* was sunk by fire and explosion at Tutuila, Samoa, suffering six killed.

21 April 1952—Saint Paul (CA-73)

During gunfire operations off North Korea, a powder blast in the forward turret of heavy cruiser *Saint Paul* killed 30 crew members.

18 July 1957—Somersworth (PCER-849)

An explosion aboard patrol ship *Somersworth* off Montauk Point, New York, killed three crew members and injured four.

12 August 1960—Exultant (MSO-441)

A flash fire in the engineering spaces of minesweeper *Exultant* off Savannah, Georgia, killed five crew members.

22 June 1967–Raleigh (LPD-1)

An engine room steam accident on amphibious transport dock *Raleigh* killed two crew members.

7 September 1968–Douglas H. Fox (DD-779)

While operating off Charleston, South Carolina, a fire aboard destroyer *Douglas H. Fox* killed two crew members and injured six.

28 June 1971–Trenton (LPD-14)

An engine room main guarding steam valve ruptured on amphibious transport dock *Trenton*, instantly killing four sailors and burning six others, two of whom later died.

1 October 1972–Newport News (CA-148)

While operating off Vietnam, a turret fire and explosion on heavy cruiser *Newport News* killed 20 crew members and injured 36 more.

30 October 1972–Florikan (ASR-9)

A fire in the forward hold of submarine rescue ship *Florikan* resulted in the death of one crew member.

3 February 1973–Basilone (DD-824)

While conducting underway training and a burial at sea off the Virginia Capes, a boiler explosion in the after fireroom of destroyer *Basilone* killed seven sailors and injured four more. (An event I was very aware of while in the engineering spaces of *Basilone* on my 1977 midshipman 3/C cruise in the Mediterranean).

9 April 1979–Manley (DD-940)

A fuel line rupture and fire on destroyer *Manley* resulted in one officer dying from burns and eight sailors suffering minor burns.

19 April 1989–Iowa (BB-61)

While conducting firing practice northeast of Puerto Rico, an explosion in the No. 2 16-inch gun turret of battleship *Iowa* killed 47 and injured 11. For more detail see H-Gram 029-4.

9 May 1989–White Plains (AFS-4)

While operating 100 miles east of Hong Kong, a fire in the engine room of combat stores ship *White Plains* killed six crew members.

8 May 1990–Conyngham (DDG-17)

A severe fuel fire in the forward boiler room of guided-missile destroyer *Conyngham* burned for 23 hours, killing one officer and injuring 18 sailors. The damage was bad enough that the ship was decommissioned and sold for scrap.

30 October 1990–Iwo Jima (LPH-2)

While taking part in amphibious landing exercises in the Arabian Sea in preparation for Operation Desert Storm, a steam valve ruptured on amphibious assault ship *Iwo Jima*, killing 10 crew members.

22 February 1992–Dahlgren (DDG-43)

An engine room fire on guided-missile destroyer *Dahlgren* killed two crew members and injured four others.

19 October 2001–Inchon (MCS-12)

A boiler room oil fire on mine countermeasures ship *Inchon* killed one sailor and injured seven others. The sailor who died, Petty Officer Third Class Ronnie Palm was awarded a posthumous Navy and Marine Corps Medal for helping fellow sailors escape.

12 July 2020–Bonhomme Richard (LHD-6)

A fire was started by arson on the lower vehicle deck of amphibious assault ship *Bonhomme Richard* while she was undergoing major maintenance. The fire took four days to extinguish and injured at least 63 sailors and civilian firefighters. Repairs were estimated to cost up to \$3.2 billion and take seven years, so the ship was decommissioned and sold for scrap (making this the most expensive peacetime disaster in U.S. Navy history).

Liberty Boat Accidents

16 February 1948

A liberty boat capsized in the Mediterranean off Les Salines de Hyeres, drowning eight sailors.

2 June 1948

A Navy launch approaching an aircraft carrier sank off Norfolk, Virginia, with the loss of 31 personnel.

24 May 1951

A liberty launch capsized off Newport, Rhode Island, drowning 19 personnel.

21 January 1954

A landing craft sank after a collision in Inchon harbor, drowning 24 Marines.

17 January 1977

A landing craft, mechanized (LCM-6) from *Trenton* capsized after colliding with Spanish merchant ship *Urlea*, off Barcelona, Spain, while carrying sailors and Marines returning from liberty to *Trenton* and Guam (LPH-9), killing 49 personnel.

21 December 1990

An Israeli-chartered ferry, shuttling crew members of carrier *Saratoga* (CV-60), capsized and sank in 20 seconds off Haifa, Israel, drowning 21 personnel.

Other Accidents

4 February 1960–Daly (DD-519)

During a storm off Virginia, destroyer *Daly* took a 65 degree roll from a rogue wave. One sailor was killed aboard ship and five others were lost overboard.

7 February 1968–Bache (DD-470)

Destroyer *Bache* was grounded at Rhodes, Greece, by heavy winds and seas. The ship was abandoned. Although there were no serious injuries, the ship was later broken up in place for salvage.

9 February 1980–King (DDG-41)

During a severe storm off Cape Hatteras, four sailors were swept overboard from guided-missile destroyer *King*. Only one was rescued and the other three drowned.

12 September 2000–La Moure County (LST-1194)

During a routine training evolution off Chile, near Caleta Cifuncho Bay, landing ship tank *La Moure County* ran hard aground. Although there were no fatalities or injuries, the ship

was damaged beyond repair. She was eventually towed off by a Chilean icebreaker and sunk as a target in the multinational maritime exercise UNITAS 2001.

18 November 2001–Peterson (DD-969)

The decrepit tanker *Samra* had been detained for smuggling Iraqi oil in violation of UN sanctions. During heavy weather in the Persian Gulf, the *Samra* foundered, taking two sailors of destroyer *Peterson*'s boarding team down with it.

14 May 2002– Essex (LHD-2)

During the first day of exercise Cobra Gold in Thailand a landing craft, air cushion (LCAC) hovercraft off *Essex* struck and killed a U.S. sailor from Beach Master Unit One, Detachment Western Pacific, Sasebo, Japan.

17 January 2013–Guardian (MCM-5)

Mine countermeasures ship *Guardian* ran hard aground on Tubbataha Reef in the Sulu Sea, Philippines. There were no casualties, but the ship could not be recovered and was dismantled in place. The U.S. government paid the Philippine government \$1.9 million for damage to the protected reef. Although the reef was mischarted, the investigation revealed the ship's crew did not adhere to standard US Navy navigation procedures.

(Sources: *Casualties: U.S. Navy and Marine Corps Personnel Killed and Injured in Selected Accidents and Other Incidents Not Directly the Result of Enemy Action [NHHC]*.)



USS *Neosho* (AO-23) departs berth (right center) successfully escaping the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941 (Library of Congress, LC- 2017874754).

H-071-3: Forgotten Valor— The Sacrifices of USS *Neosho* and USS *Sims*

H-Gram 071, Attachment 3
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC
May 2022

On Sunday morning, 7 December 1941, the fleet replenishment oiler *Neosho* (AO-23) was at the aviation fuel pier for Naval Air Station Ford Island, having nearly completed off-loading cargo containing high-octane aviation gasoline brought on the latest shuttle from the West Coast. With most of the oiler's tanks holding only highly volatile fumes,

Neosho was essentially a giant bomb moored among "Battleship Row" on the east side of Ford Island. At the mooring off *Neosho*'s port bow was the battleship *California* (BB-44), flagship of the battle fleet. Off *Neosho*'s starboard quarter were the battleships *Maryland* (BB-46) and *Oklahoma* (BB-37), nested together with *Oklahoma* to outboard. The two battleships were effectively blocked in due to *Neosho*'s length (513 feet).

The commanding officer of *Neosho* was Commander John Spinner Phillips, a United States Naval Academy (USNA) graduate of the class of 1918 with an accelerated graduation in 1917 due to World War I. During that war, Phillips served aboard the

armored cruiser *South Dakota* (later designated ACR-9) escorting convoys across the Atlantic. He served in a variety of assignments during the interwar period, including duty as an instructor at the Naval Academy (twice) and as a professor of naval science and tactics at Northwestern University, teaching naval reservists. He was the second commanding officer of *Neosho*, and *Neosho* was his first command.

The first Japanese bomb hit the mud near the seaplane ramp at the south end of Ford Island at about 0757, not far from *Neosho*. Within minutes, 24 Japanese Nakajima B5N "Kate" torpedo bombers from carriers *Akagi* and *Kaga* came streaming down Southeast Loch in pairs, launching torpedoes at Battleship Row. At the same time, 16 Kates from *Hiryu* and *Soryu* attacked from the west side of Ford Island, the usual location for U.S. aircraft carriers, which were not in port. Six of the Kates attacked the west side anyway sinking the target battleship *Utah* (AG-16). Others attacked 1010 Dock damaging light cruiser *Helena* (CL-50) and sinking minelayer *Oglala* (CM-4) while some circled around to attack the battleships on the east side of Ford Island.

Most of the torpedo bombers took the easy shot at *Oklahoma* and *West Virginia* (BB-40). *California* at the south end was hit by two torpedoes, and *Nevada* (BB-36) at the north end of Battleship Row was hit by one. As the Japanese torpedo bombers administered gross overkill on the capsizing *Oklahoma* and the sinking *West Virginia*, five of the last nine torpedo bombers from *Kaga* paid the price, downed by antiaircraft fire that the Japanese described as astonishingly heavy. However, of the 30 or so torpedo bombers that attacked the battleships on the east side of Ford Island,

not one thought that *Neosho* was worth a torpedo.

Had *Neosho* been struck by a bomb or a torpedo, the likely result would have been a catastrophic explosion on the order of that of the magazine of battleship *Arizona* (BB-39). Such an explosion would have had a devastating effect on both the topsides of the nearest battleships and the men struggling to survive the capsized *Oklahoma*, and would have greatly added to the casualty toll of the attack. Although this apparently didn't cross the minds of any Japanese pilots, one person who was acutely aware of this danger was Commander Phillips. *Neosho*'s crew quickly opened fire with the weapons they had (including rifles), but like most of the outdated antiaircraft weapons at Pearl Harbor, these were ineffective. Despite bombs, torpedoes, and strafing hitting all around, Commander Phillips knew he would have to move his ship.

Commander Phillips coolly gave the order to get underway. It took some time to get up steam, and the mooring lines had to be cut with axes because there was no one to tend them ashore. By 0842, as the first wave attack was waning, and without the assistance of tugs, Phillips first backed the ship to within a few feet of *Maryland* and the capsized *Oklahoma* without hitting either. Phillips then ordered ahead with left rudder, avoiding hitting the burning and slowly sinking *California*.



USS *Neosho* (AO-23) (right) backs clear of Battleship Row after the Japanese torpedo plane attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. USS *California* (BB-44) (left), USS *Maryland* (BB-46) (center) are still afloat near the capsized USS *Oklahoma* (BB-37) (NHHC 80-G-32640).

As Nevada commenced the famous run down Battleship Row, Neosho was already underway, crossing the harbor to Southeast Loch as the second wave attack came in. Nevada attracted the most attention from the second wave (all dive bombers, no torpedo bombers). Neosho's gunners probably downed one aircraft (it's impossible to be sure, given the volume of fire from so many ships) and damaged or drove off three others. Three Neosho crewmen were wounded by strafing. By the end of the second wave, Neosho had moored alongside Castor (AKS-1) at Berth M-3 near Merry's Point, essentially unscathed.

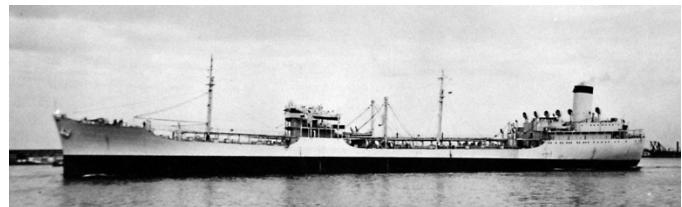
For his actions during the attack on Pearl Harbor, Commander Phillips was awarded the Navy Cross (one of 51 awarded for the battle):

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Navy Cross to Commander John Spinning Phillips, United States Navy, for extraordinary heroism and distinguished service in the line of his profession as Commanding Officer of the Fleet Oiler

U.S.S. NEOSHO (AO-23), during the Japanese attack on the United States Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor, Territory of Hawaii, 7 December 1941. At the time of the attack the U.S.S. NEOSHO was moored alongside the gasoline dock, Naval Air Station, Pearl Harbor, and had just completed discharging gasoline at that station. When fire was opened on enemy planes, Commander Phillips realized the serious fire hazard of remaining alongside the dock as well as being in a position that prevented a battleship from getting underway, got underway immediately. Mooring lines were cut, and without the assistance of tugs, Commander Phillips accomplished the extremely difficult task of getting the ship underway from this particular berth in a most efficient manner, the difficulty being greatly increased by a battleship having capsized in the harbor. The conduct of Commander Phillips throughout this action reflects great credit upon himself, and was in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

See H-Gram 066 for a more comprehensive treatment of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Neosho



USS *Neosho* (AO-23), circa mid-1939 (NHHC NH-63448).

Neosho was laid down on 22 June 1938 as a national security tanker. These tankers were built for the U.S. Merchant Marine but to Navy

specifications so that they could quickly be militarized for naval service. The construction of *Neosho* was funded by Standard Oil, but the U.S. Navy paid for a more powerful engineering plant that would enable *Neosho* to achieve speeds of 18-20 knots so the tanker could serve as a fleet replenishment oiler.

Neosho was launched on 29 April 1939, with Elizabeth Land as the sponsor. Her husband, Vice Admiral Emory S. Land, had retired from the U.S. Navy in 1937 from a distinguished career that included many naval architecture developments, particularly for U.S. submarines. He played a key role in the development of the S-class submarines, intended to be fast enough on the surface to operate with the fleet. In 1938, he accepted a position as chairman of the U.S. Maritime Commission. In that capacity he would oversee the production of over 4,000 Liberty and Victory cargo ships during World War II, building them faster than German U-boats could sink them. He was also instrumental in the establishment of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, New York, in 1943.

Neosho was the second of what would be known as the *Cimarron*-class fleet replenishment oilers, which were significantly larger and much faster than previous U.S. Navy oilers. Of the 12 original *Cimarron*-class oilers, four were completed in 1942 as escort carriers. Three, including *Neosho*, were directly commissioned into the U.S. Navy. The others were purchased by the Navy in late 1940 following brief commercial service. Including later "jumboized" versions, 35 *Cimarron* and subtype fleet replenishment oilers were built during World War II. (*Mississinewa* [AO-59] would be sunk by a

Japanese Kaiten manned suicide torpedo at Ulithi Atoll on 20 November 1944.) Some of these oilers would serve until the early 1990s.

Neosho was commissioned as AO-23 on 7 August 1939. The oiler immediately began fitting out with the capability for conducting alongside underway replenishment. This was still a relatively unproven concept, particularly for battleships and aircraft carriers. When Lieutenant Commander Chester Nimitz was the executive officer of *Maumee* (AO-2) in 1916, he devised a way to refuel destroyers underway, and this method was used with destroyers transiting the Atlantic to Europe during World War I. Nevertheless, during the interwar period it was generally considered to be too dangerous for a tanker to go alongside a capital ship when both were making way. When Nimitz became chief of the Bureau of Navigation in 1939, he instituted a series of experiments conducting alongside underway replenishment of large ships that proved it could be done safely, a capability that would be one of the most important innovations enabling the U.S. Navy to conduct combat operations for long periods far from any base.

Neosho's conversion to a fleet replenishment oiler was complete on 7 July 1941. The ship spent the following months making multiple runs from the West Coast to Pearl Harbor carrying high-octane aviation fuel.

Neosho was 553 feet in length (almost as long as a prewar U.S. battleship) and 75 feet in width. The oiler displaced 7,590 tons empty and 25,230 tons full load. *Neosho* could carry 550,000 barrels of oil in 26 strongly compartmented tanks, which allowed the ship to transport different types of fuel at the same time. Two geared steam turbines and two

shafts could propel the ship at 18-20 knots. Neosho's designed complement was 304 officers and enlisted crew members. Armament on *Cimarron*-class oilers varied and also changed over time (and sources conflict). At the time of Pearl Harbor, Neosho appeared to have one 5-inch, 51-caliber gun on the stern, three 3-inch, 23-caliber guns for antiaircraft defense, and a number of .50-caliber machine guns. After Pearl Harbor, the antiaircraft defenses were augmented with eight 20-milimeter Oerlikon cannons, and the 5-inch gun may have been upgraded to a .38-caliber dual-purpose gun. Although the 20-milimeter cannons were a significant improvement, they still lacked the range and punch to bring down Japanese dive bombers and torpedo bombers before the weapons-release point (they were good at keeping planes from coming back a second time).

After Pearl Harbor, Neosho was a critical strategic asset, as tankers were in short supply. This situation was aggravated when the older (and smaller and slower) Nechoes (AO-5) was torpedoed and sunk by Japanese submarine I-72 on 23 January 1942 near Hawaii, with the loss of 57 men (126 were rescued). On 1 March 1942, tanker Pecos (AO-6) was sunk by Japanese carrier dive bombers south of Java with heavy loss of life, including most of the crew of seaplane tender *Langley* (AV-3) (see H-Gram 069). Neosho frequently operated independently due to a shortage of escorts (which cost the Nechoes) and sometimes supported carrier task forces. In late April 1942, Neosho was assigned to provide support to Task Force 17 (TF-17), centered on Yorktown (CV-5).

Battle of the Coral Sea

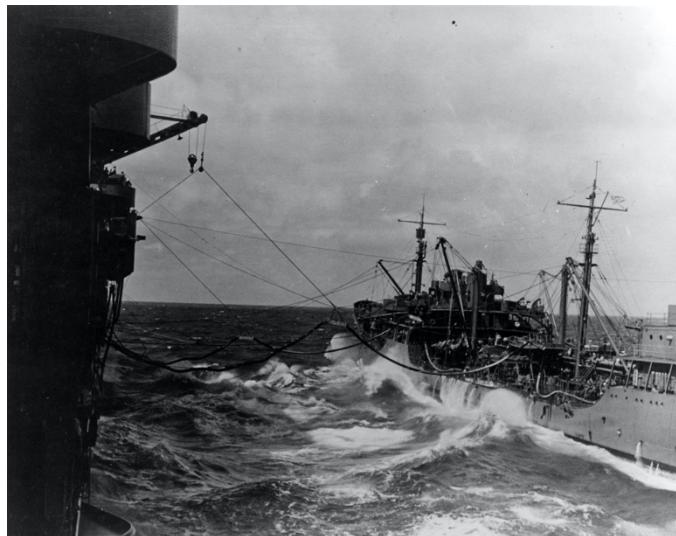
On 4 May 1942, aircraft from Yorktown attacked the Japanese seaplane base at Tulagi. The Japanese had just established this base across the sound north of Guadalcanal (a name which at the time meant nothing to anyone in the United States or Japan). Although the results of the raid were exaggerated, five of the big Kawanishi H6K Type 97 "Mavis" four-engine flying boats were destroyed, significantly degrading Japanese long-range search capability in the Coral Sea at a critical time. The raid also alerted the Japanese that there was at least one U.S. aircraft carrier operating in the Coral Sea, and that their planned operation to seize Port Moresby (Operation Mo) on the southeast coast of New Guinea would be opposed.

Based on intelligence reporting from decrypted Japanese communications and traffic analysis, the United States had a good understanding of the intent of the Japanese Operation Mo and of the Japanese forces involved. A U.S. carrier force, consisting of Yorktown and Lexington (CV-2), under the command of Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, was specifically committed, based on the intelligence, to oppose the Japanese Port Moresby operation and hopefully ambush the two Japanese fleet carriers *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* (both veterans of the attack on Pearl Harbor). After launching the Doolittle Raid on Japan, carriers *Enterprise* (CV-6) and *Hornet* (CV-8) were racing toward the Coral Sea but would not make it in time (see H-Gram 004).

The Japanese plan called for transports with army troops to round the eastern tip of New Guinea to assault Port Moresby. This force was to be covered by the light carrier *Shoho*,

four heavy cruisers, and other light cruisers and destroyers. Acting in support of the operation were the two carriers of Japanese Carrier Division 5 (CarDiv-5), the *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*. Rear Admiral Takeo Takagi was in command of the overall carrier force, and Rear Admiral Chuichi "King Kong" Hara was in command of CarDiv-5. As Takagi did not have much aviation experience, he deferred most carrier operation decisions to Hara. (Fletcher did much the same with Rear Admiral Aubrey Fitch, who was embarked on *Lexington*.)

The Japanese carrier force entered the Coral Sea via a circuitous path to the north and then the east, essentially coming in south from where the United States was expecting them. Neither force wanted to use carrier aircraft to search for the other, so as not to give away their presence, relying instead on land-based aircraft to do the searching. This approach proved fruitless on 5 and 6 May, as neither side found the other.



USS *Neosho* (AO-23) refueling USS *Yorktown* (CV-5), 1 May 1942 (NHHC 80-G-464653).

On 6 May, *Neosho* refueled *Yorktown* and heavy cruiser *Astoria* (CA-34). As *Neosho* was alongside *Yorktown*, a pilot from Scouting

Squadron 5 (VS-5), Lieutenant Stanley "Swede" Vejtasa, was literally strapped into the bosun's chair (and his seabag was already across) to be sent to *Neosho* for onward transport to Pearl Harbor to execute change of station orders. At the last moment, the commanding officer of VS-5 managed to have Vejtasa's orders postponed (in anticipation of battle), so Vejtasa and another VS-5 pilot remained on board *Yorktown* while five other sailors from *Yorktown* and heavy cruiser *Portland* (CA-33) made the chair ride to *Neosho*.

Vejtasa would bomb the Japanese light carrier *Shoho* on 7 May and would be credited with shooting down three Japanese fighters while flying a Douglas SBD Dauntless dive bomber. He subsequently transferred to flying Grumman F4F Wildcat fighters in Fighter Squadron 10 (VF-10). During the Battle of Santa Cruz in October 1942, Vejtasa was credited with shooting down seven Japanese aircraft in a single mission (actually it was four, but still...). He would be awarded the Navy Cross three times during the war, with a total of 10.25 kills credited. In another minute on 6 May 1942, his fate might have turned out quite different.

Upon completion of the refueling evolution, *Neosho* was directed to a position further to the south that would be presumably safer, as a major battle was expected in the next day. The destroyer *Sims* (DD-409) was assigned to escort *Neosho*, probably because unreliable boilers made the destroyer a potential liability in a major action. The commanding officer of *Sims* since 6 October 1941 was Lieutenant Commander Wilford Milton Hyman (USNA '24).



USS Sims (DD-409), circa 1940 (NHHC 19-N-21805).

Sims was the lead ship of a class of 12, the last class of destroyers completed before the outbreak of World War II (and in common with many lead ships, *Sims* had some significant teething problems, particularly unreliable boiler tubes prone to breaking down at inopportune times). Five *Sims*-class destroyers would be lost during the war. *Sims* was laid down on 15 July 1937 and launched on 8 April 1939, sponsored by Anne Sims, widow of the ship's namesake (Rear Admiral William S. Sims died in 1936; during World War I he was temporarily promoted to vice admiral as commander of U.S. Naval Forces Operating in European Waters, but reverted to two-star rank after the war as president of the U.S. Naval War College).

Sims was 348 feet long and displaced 1,600 tons (standard) and 2,246 tons (full). A propulsion plant of high-pressure superheated boilers, geared turbines, and twin screws allowed the destroyer to achieve 35 knots. The ship's designed complement was 10 officers and 182 enlisted crew members. *Sims* was armed with five 5-inch, 38-caliber guns in single mounts (three in turrets and two open mounts), four quadruple 21-inch torpedo tube mounts, and two depth charge racks on the stern. The destroyer's initial antiaircraft fit of eight .50-caliber machine guns was upgraded by the time of

Coral Sea with four 20-milimeter Oerlikon cannons.

After commissioning, *Sims* served as part of the U.S. Neutrality Patrol (see H-Gram 001), an undeclared shooting war with German U-boats. At the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor *Sims* was assigned to Task Force 17, centered on carrier *Yorktown* (which had been taken from the Pacific to augment capability in the Atlantic in anticipation of war with Germany). On 16 December 1941, *Yorktown* and a screen departed Norfolk to return to the Pacific. TF-17 then covered a convoy transporting U.S. Marines from San Diego to Samoa in late January.

Sims screened *Yorktown* during the carrier raids on the Marshall Islands; before the raids, *Sims* was attacked by a Japanese land-based bomber on 28 January 1942, but the four bombs impacted 1,500 yards astern. On 16 February, *Sims* sortied with *Yorktown* from Pearl Harbor to strike Wake Island (which had fallen to the Japanese at Christmas), but TF-17 was ordered south to Canton Island. *Sims* then screened *Yorktown* during the 10 March raid by *Yorktown* and *Lexington* aircraft on the Japanese landings at Lae and Salamaua, New Guinea, which caught the Japanese by surprise and inflicted significant damage.

On 7 May, the U.S. and Japanese carrier forces were actually in close proximity, but wound up each launching major air strikes in the opposite direction. Fletcher received reports of Japanese carriers off the eastern tip of New Guinea and launched a full strike from both *Lexington* and *Yorktown*, leaving only enough aircraft behind for combat air patrol to defend the carriers. The report turned out to be a garble of "cruisers," but it was too late to recall the strike (something not easily done

anyway), and the aircraft found and pummeled *Shoho* under an avalanche of bombs and torpedoes, sinking the light carrier with gross overkill. *Shoho*'s four escorting heavy cruisers went unscathed, and would form the majority of the force that inflicted the greatest defeat of the U.S. Navy at sea in the Battle of Savo Island in August 1942.

With both U.S. carrier air groups fully committed to a strike on a small carrier (*Shoho*), the U.S. carriers were potentially very vulnerable to a large Japanese air strike. However, Takagi and Hara had made a similar mistake, and the large Japanese air strike was heading in the wrong direction.

By the morning of 7 May, Rear Admiral Takagi was fed up with the lack of results from land-based searches, and Hara ordered the launch of carrier aircraft to search. Not knowing the U.S. carriers were actually west northwest of them, the search aircraft concentrated to the south, where the Japanese expected the U.S. carriers to be. The planes were launched just before dawn, and when the sun came up, the skies were mostly clear and the seas moderate, but growing rougher.

At 0722, lookouts on *Neosho* and *Sims* sighted two unidentified aircraft on the horizon. Neither aircraft approached close enough to be identified as enemy or friendly. The aircraft were in fact two B5N2 "Kate" torpedo bombers off *Shokaku*. The Japanese pilots had expected to find an aircraft carrier, and that's what they saw, radioing back that they had sighted both an aircraft carrier and a cruiser.

Based on the contact report, the Japanese wasted no time launching a 78-plane strike,

consisting of 18 Mitsubishi A6M "Zeke" fighters (more commonly known as "Zeroes"), 36 Aichi D3A "Val" dive bombers, and 24 B5N2 "Kate" torpedo bombers (the Japanese had a shortage of torpedoes, so some of the Kates were armed with bombs instead). This amounted to about 75 percent of the 108 operational aircraft on board the two carriers (diverging from Japanese doctrine, which was to launch 50 percent from both carriers and hold the other 50 percent in reserve for additional targets). The strike was led by the commander of the *Shokaku* air group, Lieutenant Commander Kakuichi Takahashi.

Later that morning at 0929, a bomb exploded close aboard *Sims* from an aircraft that had not been detected on radar nor sighted by lookouts. The detonation threw Lieutenant Commander Hyman to the deck, and he sustained a possible concussion. This plane was another Japanese carrier aircraft out searching, reporting back that it had seen no carrier or cruiser before it decided to drop a bomb on the destroyer. The plane continued to circle for a time out of gun range.

At 1005, *Sims*'s radar and lookouts detected between 10 and 15 aircraft coming in from 025°T (True bearing). This was Takahashi leading his strike. *Sims* opened fire. Disconcertingly, many of *Sims*'s shells were duds, as had been the case at Pearl Harbor. Takahashi carefully kept his group out of range as he quickly determined that *Neosho* and *Sims* were not an aircraft carrier and a cruiser. A large group of aircraft passed to the west of *Neosho* and *Sims* and another to the east, remaining out of range. A few planes continued to circle as the rest fanned out in a search pattern to find the carrier. For over 90 minutes, the Japanese carrier planes searched and found nothing.

At 1033, a group of about 10 planes approached *Neosho* from the southwest, three of which were identified as twin-engine aircraft, which dropped three bombs each from an altitude above effective antiaircraft range. Captain Phillips (temporary promotion as of 27 February) deftly maneuvered *Neosho* to avoid the bombs, with the closest missing 25 yards to starboard. Since twin-engine aircraft would not have come from a carrier, these were presumably Japanese land-based bombers from Rabaul at maximum range, or U.S. or Australian aircraft from Australia in a friendly fire incident no one ever owned up to (U.S. Martin B-26 Marauder twin-engine bombers did attack an Allied cruiser-destroyer force, but that was closer to New Guinea). Anyway, the origin of these planes is a bit of a mystery, at least to me.

Neosho sent a message reporting an attack by three aircraft with no hit. This message was the first that made Rear Admiral Fletcher aware of the threat to *Neosho*. It did not cause undue concern, as it appeared the attack had been unsuccessful and *Neosho* was OK. It would, however, be the last message received from *Neosho* for many hours.

Finally, Takahashi was convinced that the carrier was a phantom and reported back that they could find only the oiler and destroyer. "King Kong" Hara lived up to his nickname in his reaction. By that time, the two pilots who had made the original sighting report had recovered aboard and admitted they were not absolutely certain they'd seen a carrier. Other scout aircraft had not seen any carrier either. Worse, the Japanese began receiving reports of the U.S. carrier aircraft strike on *Shoho*. Takagi and Hara then realized they

were in an extremely vulnerable position, not knowing the U.S. carriers were equally vulnerable. By this time, it was not possible to redirect the strike toward the U.S. carriers, so Hara issued a recall order.

Since there was no sense in wasting precious torpedoes on an oiler, Takahashi immediately sent the torpedo bombers back, but requested permission from Hara to bomb the U.S. ships, since they were there anyway. Hara assented. Commencing at 1201 until 1218, hell rained down on *Neosho* and *Sims* from at least 24 Japanese dive bombers. Ten other planes, presumably Kates armed with bombs, dropped on *Sims* with only one hitting close enough to do some minor damage.

Three waves of dive bombers attacked *Neosho*. The first wave approached from the stern, apparently disconcerted by the maneuverability of *Neosho* (twin screw) and volume of antiaircraft fire, which although not very accurate was intense. All the bombs missed *Neosho*. One plane was hit and crashed in pieces into the ocean. The second wave had the same result except for one damaging near miss.

During the fray, four dive bombers peeled away from *Neosho* and attacked *Sims* with devastating results. The first bomb was either a hit or a very close near miss. The second bomb exploded in the forward engineering space. The third went through the upper deckhouse and exploded in the after engineering space. The fourth bomb appeared to hit near the number 4 gun toward the stern.

Sims continued to fire while being hit and struck a Japanese plane. With about half a wing and part of his tail blown off, the pilot

was somehow able to hold the plane in the air long enough to crash into *Neosho* near the number 4 gun enclosure, starting a large fire on the oiler. The luck of both ships had run out.

Sims's hull buckled amidships, and very quickly the midsection of the ship was awash. *Sims* went dead in the water, all power lost, although the auxiliary generator kicked in as it was supposed to. The radar mast collapsed. Fires were raging aft, threatening the ammunition magazine. The aft guns ceased firing although the two forward 5-inch guns continued to blast away in local control. A number of the crew had been blown overboard. Most of the ship's rafts were destroyed.

Sims was doomed, but Lieutenant Commander Hyman was not ready to give up the ship, nor was most of his crew. Fire and damage control parties were quickly formed; however, there was no way to get from the forward to the aft end of the ship due to the flooding and fire. Two motorized whaleboats were put in the water. One immediately sank. The other drifted away from the ship in sinking condition. Sailors were able to swim to the whaleboat, start the motor, patch an 18-inch hole, and bring the boat back close to the ship. Lieutenant Commander Hyman directed the whaleboat to proceed aft and organize an attempt to flood the after magazine before the fire caused it to blow up. It quickly became apparent that this was a hopeless task as the ship was going down too fast. By this time Lieutenant Commander Hyman had ordered the bridge abandoned except for himself and a yeoman.

As *Sims* broke in two, Lieutenant Commander Hyman gave the order to abandon ship,

arguably too late. Hyman was last seen remaining on the bridge as the ship went under. The gunners in the forward turrets didn't get the word and were still shooting as the forward section went down. A last shell was seen to break the surface of the water from a gun already under the surface. According to the senior survivor of *Sims*, Chief Signalman Robert J. Dicken, the commanding officer "showed an example of courage throughout the entire engagement." Lieutenant Commander Hyman would later be awarded a posthumous Navy Cross.

After *Sims* sank, there were a series of underwater explosions, one very powerful. Only one person that was still in the water was known to have survived, but was badly wounded from the effects of the shock wave through the water. After the explosions, the only survivors were 15 men in the whaleboat and about 20 on a raft, out of 252 aboard. The 20 men on the raft would never be seen again.

Unlike the first two waves, the third (and last) wave of dive bombers split up and attacked from multiple directions simultaneously, diluting the effectiveness of the antiaircraft guns. A number of gunners had already been killed by shrapnel from the near miss and the crash of the Japanese plane into *Neosho*. Although other crew members quickly stepped in despite the gore, the effectiveness waned at a critical point. Captain Phillips would report that three Japanese planes were shot down over the course of the attack, and another four badly damaged. But the third wave was too overwhelming.

Neosho was hit by seven bombs from the third wave. The first bomb hit the main deck on the port side. The second hit the stack

deck and penetrated into the bunker tank, starting another fire. A near miss cut down a gun crew with shrapnel, decapitating one sailor (a sight burned into the memory of most of the surviving crew). A third bomb also hit the port side. The fourth bomb penetrated into the fireroom, setting off a steam leak that instantly killed every man in the space (but luckily the boilers did not blow up). Three other bombs blew large holes in fuel tanks, but passed right out the bottom of the ship without causing fires.

At this point, Captain Phillips gave the order to "make preparations for abandoning ship and stand by." Much of the crew mistakenly processed Phillips's direction as an order to abandon their ship. They had seen *Sims* go down in a matter of a couple minutes, and their own ship was obviously grievously damaged. Many of the crew panicked, and many more honestly believed they were carrying out an order to abandon the ship. Much to Captain Phillips's consternation, all of a sudden rafts, boats, and men (including at least four officers) were going over the side and into the water (this included the officer of the deck, who abandoned his position on the bridge and jumped overboard).



USS *Neosho* (AO-23) is burning and sinking after an attack by Japanese dive bombers on 7 May 1942 (Japanese Defense Agency).

By 1218, the Japanese attack was over. *Sims* was gone and *Neosho* was burning and listing, dead in the water, but did not appear to be in imminent danger of sinking (at least to the skipper, not so to just about everyone else). At 1230, Captain Phillips hailed the two whaleboats that had been lowered into the water and cast off. Two officers that had gone overboard had finally assumed leadership of the boats. Captain Phillips ordered them to retrieve men from the water and bring them back to the ship. Instead, the two boats spent the next hours in the increasingly rough seas, plucking men from the water and delivering them to seven rafts, as there were far too many men in the water to be brought aboard the whaleboats. During this time, a pharmacist's mate from *Neosho*, Henry Tucker, swam from raft to raft administering aid, particularly treatment for burns, to the many wounded. At some point, however, Tucker must have tired and drowned.

In the late afternoon, the two boats returned to *Neosho* full of survivors, including the most badly wounded from the rafts. However, neither boat towed any rafts to *Neosho*. The whaleboat with 15 survivors from *Sims* also reached *Neosho*. About this time, Captain Phillips also learned that the communications officer had been so paralyzed by fear that he had sent no messages, despite orders to do so. Finally, a message went out at 1600 reporting the loss of *Sims* and the dire situation aboard *Neosho*.

As light began to fade in the afternoon, Captain Phillips made the decision that it was too late to send the boats back out to retrieve rafts before darkness set in. This was a fateful decision. Phillips assumed that a rescue ship would come quickly (this was a correct assumption); however, what Phillips did not

know was that the *Neosho* navigator's celestial fix, included in the 1600 report, was off by 64 miles. By the next morning, the rafts had drifted out of sight.

Upon receipt of *Neosho*'s distress message (sent in the clear because codebooks and sensitive material had already been deep-sixed when it appeared the ship was most in danger of sinking), the destroyer *Monaghan* (DD-354) from *Lexington*'s screen was dispatched to proceed to *Neosho*'s reported position. (This would also give *Lexington* one less escort during the next day's climactic battle, in which *Lexington* would be lost.) *Monaghan* had already been sent south of the task force to transmit important messages (including the sinking of *Shoho*) so as not to compromise the carriers' position.

As darkness fell, there was no guarantee that *Neosho* would remain afloat overnight, so Captain Phillips made the decision to keep and treat the wounded in the whaleboats alongside, which would give them a better chance of survival in case *Neosho* suddenly went down.

At the evening muster on *Neosho*, out of a crew of 20 officers and 267 enlisted men, 16 officers and 91 enlisted men were on board *Neosho* or in the whaleboats alongside. One officer and 19 enlisted men were confirmed dead. Four officers and 156 enlisted men were either dead in compartments below, drowned in the sea, or on the rafts. (It would turn out that the muster was off by two; there were actually a total of 158 missing.) There were also 15 survivors from *Sims*. During the night, one wounded sailor from *Sims* died as did one from *Neosho*. *Neosho*'s medical officer was dead or missing, but two petty officers made heroic efforts to tend the

wounded. The dead sailors were committed to the deep with a short ceremony.

By the morning of 8 May, the condition of *Neosho* had continued to deteriorate; a list that had reached 30 degrees was partially compensated for by counterflooding and the fires had been put out, but there were signs of severe hull stress and buckling of the deck plates. The ship had minimal auxiliary power, which limited the range of the radios.

In the meantime, *Monaghan* was searching in the wrong place, eventually reporting there was no trace of *Neosho*—no debris, no oil, nothing. As the main event of the Battle of the Coral Sea unfolded, *Monaghan* was ordered to continue to Noumea with important messages. The destroyer *Henley* (DD-391), then at Noumea, received orders to get underway and search for *Neosho*, a risky proposition for a lone destroyer in the middle of one of the biggest battles of the war. *Henley* was commanded by Commander Robert Hall Smith, with the commander of Destroyer Division 7, Commander Leonard B. Austin, embarked. The search would be complicated because *Neosho* could neither effectively send nor receive messages (and since most received messages would have been encrypted, they would have also been unintelligible).

On 8 May, with no sign of a rescue ship, Captain Phillips decided to personally replot the navigator's fix, and to his great distress, he discovered the math error. Given drift, *Neosho* was probably over 75 miles from where any ship or aircraft would be searching. Phillips shared this information with his senior officers, but not with the crew.

During the night of 8-9 May, three more wounded *Neosho* sailors died. *Neosho* still remained afloat, but for how long was anybody's guess. A number of crew members made harrowing trips down into the ship to retrieve rations, water, and other supplies. Extensive work went into freeing another motor launch that was inaccessible due to the list. After much hard manual labor, the boat was put into the water. Several rafts were also fashioned from salvaged material on the ship.

During the night of 9-10 May, two more wounded *Neosho* sailors died. By the morning of 10 May, the list had by itself been considerably reduced, although it was obvious that the reason for this was because the ship was settling dangerously lower in the water. Also, unbeknownst to Captain Phillips but known to Commander Austin and Commander Hall on *Henley*, the Japanese carrier force had returned to the scene of the 8 May battle in the hopes of finishing off any U.S. ships (after Takagi and Hara had been royally reamed for disengaging after the severe damage to *Shokaku* in the 8 May battle).

By 10 May, Captain Phillips was convinced that *Neosho* would not remain afloat much longer, and that when the oiler did sink, it could happen very fast. He ordered that the three whaleboats and the motor launch be rigged with sails and provisioned for an extended period at sea (no one, including Captain Phillips, was very keen on this because the coast of Australia was over 500 miles away, plus the boats would be a lot harder for any searchers to find). By this time, the suffering of the crew from the heat and sunburn was intense, as no one dared go below. Everything was set in place for the crew to get in the boats (and in towed

makeshift rafts) in a hurry if the ship started to go down during the night. The plan was set for the next day; the officers in charge of each boat would embark at 1200, with all crew members and provisions aboard by 1400, at which time the boats would set sail for Australia.

There was finally hope when at 1230 on 10 May an Australian Lockheed Hudson twin-engine bomber at its maximum range overflowed *Neosho* at an altitude that there was no doubt *Neosho* had been seen. However, the plane could not linger. The plane did report the contact upon its return to Australia, but the message took a rather tortuous and time-consuming path through General Douglas MacArthur's headquarters into Navy channels. Fortunately, no more crew members died during the night of 10-11 May.

Early on 11 May, *Henley* commenced searching at *Neosho*'s last incorrectly reported position. Commander Austin and Commander Smith rather quickly deduced that the position report had to be incorrect (a sunken oiler should leave a big oil slick) and that if *Neosho* was still afloat, the oiler was probably drifting to the west northwest, a correct assumption. *Henley* was already heading in the right direction when the Australian position report finally arrived. *Henley* cranked up its speed, at great risk, given the Japanese carrier force in the Coral Sea and the possibility of submarines (although there weren't any of those). At 0930, *Henley* found the oil slick.

At 1130, a U.S. Consolidated PBY Catalina flying boat overflowed *Henley*. *Henley* signaled for the PBY to search to the west northwest. The PBY quickly found *Neosho* still afloat, wagged its wings to assure the survivors that

they had been seen, and flew back to *Henley* to signal the location and that there were at least 50 survivors. The PBY then headed away so as to not draw any Japanese attention to the rescue operation.

At 1323, Captain Phillips logged sighting *Henley*. Commander Austin had no desire to hang around long, and the rescue was expedited because the whaleboats and launch were ready to go. The first boat of survivors reached *Henley* at 1345 and the last at 1415. *Henley* brought on board a total of 123 survivors—104 of *Neosho*'s crew, plus the five passengers from *Yorktown* and *Portland* (who all lived) and 14 survivors from *Sims*. Six of *Neosho*'s crew and one crew member from *Sims* had died while awaiting rescue. Two more *Neosho* sailors and one more from *Sims* would succumb to their wounds while aboard *Henley*. One of the *Neosho* crew members who died on *Henley* was Chief Watertender Oscar Peterson, who would be awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor for his actions in closing bulkhead steam valves during the attack, knowing that he would be severely burned in doing so.

After the survivors were on board *Henley*, the boats were then scuttled, although one stubbornly refused to sink (and would be seen several days later). Captain Phillips and Commander Austin conferred on what to do with *Neosho*. Phillips requested that the oiler be scuttled and Austin agreed. At 1428, *Henley* fired a torpedo at *Neosho*; it hit, but it was a dud. *Henley* fired a second torpedo that hit and exploded without any sign that *Neosho* was going to sink any faster. Finally, after 146 rounds of 5-inch ammunition, *Neosho* went under at 1522 on 11 May 1942.

Captain Phillips informed Commander Austin of the large number of men on the missing rafts and requested that the search continue. Despite the risk, Commander Austin agreed, and for three days *Henley* searched without any sign of the rafts or men. *Henley* broke off the search due to fuel state, but Commander Austin ordered another Destroyer Division 7 (DesDiv-7) destroyer, *Helm* (DD-388), to continue the search, despite the low probability of anyone on the rafts surviving for so long.

After daybreak on 16 May, lookouts on *Helm* sighted what appeared to be a man standing up in a raft. *Helm* then found a raft with four survivors of *Neosho*, all in very bad shape. Seaman Second Class William A. Smith had seen the ship, and with what had to have been a superhuman effort given his weakened and dehydrated condition, managed to stand up. Had he not done so, in all likelihood he would not have been seen in the grey-painted low-riding water-logged raft.

The four survivors were the last of what had been 68 men in four rafts lashed together. In a nightmarish nine days, the others had succumbed to wounds, exposure, dehydration, and worst of all, salt water ingestion. In the week prior to the sinking, rain squalls were common. In the week afterward, there was no rain at all. Against all warnings, desperately thirsty sailors would drink salt water, resulting in violent hallucinations followed by an excruciating death. Dead bodies that were rolled off the raft would float alongside it for hours, devoured by all manner of sea life, adding to the horror. Whatever happened to the other three rafts is unknown, other than that no one aboard them was ever found.

Helm resumed searching for other rafts, but one of the survivors, Seaman Second Class Ken Bright, died. The commanding officer determined that the others would die too if they didn't get medical care ashore, so *Helm* broke off the search. Another of the raft survivors, Seaman Second Class Thaddeus Tunnel, died in the hospital in Brisbane, Australia. Thus, of 158 missing men from *Neosho*, only William Smith and Seaman Second Class Jack Rolston survived the horrific ordeal.

On 25 May, Captain Phillips submitted an extensive after-action report, which included several recommendations, including that life rafts should be a bright color (covered by tarpaulin on the ship) rather than hard-to-see gray. In addition, life rafts should be equipped with a telescoping stick to permit a flag to be bent at the top, thus aiding the raft's visibility. He recommended that all ship's boats be equipped for sail. His last recommendation was "that the words 'ABANDON SHIP' be deleted from all preliminary orders given; that the preliminary order be 'FALL IN AT (or MAN) BOAT AND RAFT STATIONS,' and that the words 'ABANDON SHIP' be used only when it is desired to accomplish just that, namely, for all personnel to leave the ship."

Captain Phillips also recommended nine members of his crew receive awards of the highest order (Phillips didn't know about Pharmacist's Mate Tucker's heroism when he wrote the report). He also recommended 32 personnel (including at least one from *Sims*) for accelerated advancement and promotion.



Chief Watertender Oscar Verner Peterson, U.S. Navy, circa 1930s (NHHC 80-G-44115).

Chief Watertender Oscar Verner Peterson was awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor:

For extraordinary courage and conspicuous heroism above and beyond the call of duty while in charge of a repair party during an attack on the U.S.S. NEOSHO by enemy Japanese aerial forces on 7 May 1942. Lacking assistance because of injuries to the other members of his repair party and severely wounded himself, Peterson, with no concern for his own life, closed the bulkhead stop valves and in so doing received additional burns which resulted in his death. His spirit of self-sacrifice and loyalty, characteristic of a fine seaman, was in keeping with the

highest traditions of the U.S. Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life in the service of his country.

Peterson had enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1920 and spent his entire career at sea. He died of his burn wounds on 13 May 1942, aboard *Henley*, after being rescued from *Neosho*.

Due to an apparent administrative oversight, there was no award ceremony for Peterson's family; rather, the medal was mailed to his widow. This was not corrected until 2010 when Rear Admiral James A. Symonds, commander, Navy Region Northwest, formally presented the Medal of Honor, a 48-star flag, and an appropriate marker to Peterson's son and family.

The *Edsall*-class destroyer escort DE-152 was named in Peterson's honor. Commissioned in September 1943, *Peterson* escorted numerous Atlantic convoys, hitting *U-550* with gunfire and shallow-set depth charges and causing the U-boat to surrender, though it still sank. *Peterson* was decommissioned at the end of the war and recommissioned during the Korean War for Cold War service including the Cuban Missile Crisis naval quarantine. *Peterson* also appeared in the 1962 Hollywood movie *PT 109* playing the part of the Japanese destroyer that rammed and sank future president John F. Kennedy's patrol torpedo (PT) boat.

Other personnel receiving awards for valor on *Neosho* include the following:

Pharmacist's Mate Third Class Henry Tucker was awarded a posthumous Navy Cross for his valor in swimming from raft to raft administering burn treatments until he disappeared. The *John C. Butler*-class

destroyer escort DE-377 was named in his honor, but construction was cancelled in 1944. His name was then given to *Gearing*-class destroyer DD-875, commissioned in March 1945, earning seven battle stars in Korea and Vietnam and a Combat Action Ribbon before being transferred to the Brazilian Navy in 1973.

Lieutenant Commander Thomas M. Brown was awarded a Navy Cross for his actions as gunnery officer in shooting down three Japanese aircraft and damaging four more, as well as serving as de facto executive officer due to injuries to Lieutenant Commander Francis J. Firth.

Silver Stars were awarded to Lieutenant Commander Francis J. Firth, the executive officer, Lieutenant Louis Verbrugge, the engineering officer, Machinist's Mate First Class Harold Bratt, and Machinist's Mate Second Class Wayne Simmons. Pharmacist's Mate First Class William J. Ward was awarded a Navy and Marine Corps Medal for his role in caring for the many wounded after the medical officer had been killed. Chief Pharmacist's Mate Robert W. Hoag was also commended for his action (there was no Commendation Medal yet).

The commanding officer of *Neosho* was awarded a Silver Star:

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star to Rear Admiral (then Captain) John Spinning Phillips, United States Navy, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity as Commanding Officer of Fleet Oiler U.S.S. NEOSHO (AO-23), in action against enemy Japanese forces in the Battle of the Coral Sea, on

7 May 1942. Attacked by enemy dive-bombing planes attacking from all directions, Rear Admiral Phillips maneuvered his ship with skill and avoided many of the hostile bombs. When violent fires were started and his ship was seriously damaged by bomb hits and a crashing plane, he continued to fight off attacking hostile aircraft, causing the destruction of three planes and damage to four others. With the NEOSHO in sinking condition after the attack, Rear Admiral Phillips immediately assembled all survivors, insured the welfare and safety of the wounded and supervised abandoning operations. His coolness, courage and inspiring leadership throughout this battle reflect the highest credit upon Rear Admiral Phillips and the United States Naval Service.

In his report, Captain Phillips also censured three officers "whose performance of duty contributed to unnecessary confusion, made search for survivors uncertain, and detracted from what was otherwise a glorious achievement in the history of the United States Navy." The three officers all happened to be Naval Reserve (as were most of the officers on the ship), and the comments were unvarnished. As an example, the communications officer "did not display the qualities of a leader, and did not inspire courage or confidence in those who came in contact with him ... he should at least make an attempt to appear courageous even though inwardly frightened." Despite the scathing comments, Phillips finished with this: "Inasmuch as these three officers volunteered their services for active duty long before the entry of the United States in the present war, thereby showing a laudable intention, that

they all conducted themselves in a creditable manner in the face of the enemy at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and that they, as well as other personnel on board, were subject to a terrific and continuous attack by dive bombers, with concurrent shock and numbing of faculties, the Commanding Officer feels that the best interests of the Navy will be served by not recommending them for Court Martials. Appropriate comments will be made on the fitness reports of the three officers concerned."

Commander Phillips was offered a follow-on at-sea command more than once, but he declined each time. He nevertheless was promoted to rear admiral and served the rest of the war in intelligence assignments.

The commanding officer of Sims was awarded a posthumous Navy Cross in April 1943:

The President of the United States of America takes pride in presenting the Navy Cross (Posthumously) to Lieutenant Commander Wilford Milton Hyman, United States Navy, for extraordinary heroism and distinguished service in the line of his profession as Commanding Officer of the Destroyer U.S.S. SIMS (DD-409), during operations in the Coral Sea on 7 May 1942. Lieutenant Hyman skillfully warded off the first raid of a hostile aircraft attack on his vessel and the ship it was escorting, and, in the second raid, when the Sims lay dead and crippled in the water, he kept her guns blazing away until the last Japanese plane had disappeared. Then he coolly directed salvage and repair operations until the bridge of the vessel was completely awash and he went down

into the sea. The conduct of Lieutenant Commander Hyman throughout this action reflects great credit upon himself, and was in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for our country.

The *Allen M. Sumner*-class destroyer DD-732 was named in Hyman's honor. Commissioned in June 1944, *Hyman* was hit by a kamikaze off Okinawa on 5 April 1945 with the loss of 12 men killed and 40 wounded. After undergoing repairs, *Hyman* served in Korea and in the Cuban Missile Crisis naval quarantine before being decommissioned in November 1969

Of the search ships, destroyer *Monaghan*, which sank a Japanese midget submarine inside Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 and earned 12 battle stars, was lost in Typhoon Cobra off Luzon in December 1944 with all but six of her crew. Destroyer *Henley*, with four battle stars, was torpedoed and sunk by Japanese submarine RO-108 off Finschafen (near New Guinea) with the loss of 15 of her crew; 243 were rescued after a relatively short time. *Helm* survived the war with 11 battle stars and helped rescue 605 survivors of the escort carrier *Bismarck Sea* (CVE-95), sunk by a kamikaze off Iwo Jima in February 1945.

Of note, there are significant differences in eyewitness accounts of the attack on *Neosho* and *Sims*. I did my best at reconciliation but I doubt there will ever truly be a definitive account of that action. I generally stayed close to the account of the commanding officer of *Neosho*. The book by Don Keith (in sources below) is the best I've seen on the subject, besides being an excellent read.

See H-Gram 005 for a more comprehensive treatment of the battle.

(Sources include: Don Keith, *The Ship that Wouldn't Die: The Saga of the USS Neosho—a World War II Story of Courage and Survival at Sea* (New York : NAL Caliber, 2016); Chief Signalman Robert J. Dicken, "Personal Observations of Sims #409 Disaster," 13 May 1942, in *USS Neosho (AO-23) War Diary, 1 April 1942-7 May 1942, Record Group 38 (RG 38)*, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, MD; Captain John S. Phillips, "Engagement of *USS Neosho* with Japanese Aircraft on May 7, 1942; Subsequent loss of *USS Neosho*; Search for Survivors," 7 May 1942, RG 38, NARA; and NHHC Dictionary of American Fighting Ships [DANFS].)