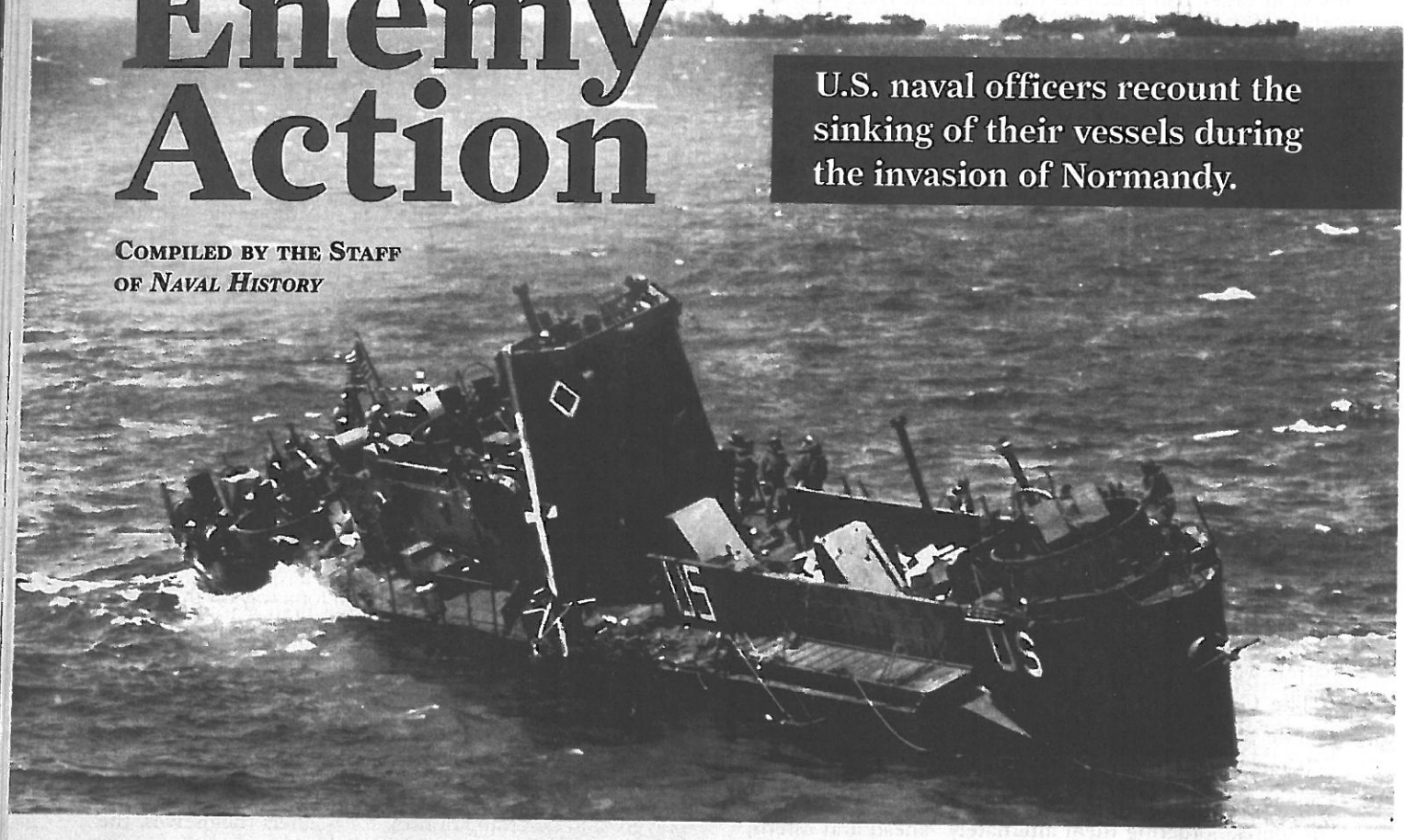
Lost to Enemy Action

U.S. naval officers recount the sinking of their vessels during the invasion of Normandy.

COMPILED BY THE STAFF OF *NAVAL HISTORY*



Early D-Day Loss

Lieutenant Commander Rency F. Sewell, commanding officer, *PC-1261*[1]

The *PC-1261* was primarily a control vessel for Utah Red Beach in the invasion of France. The primary purpose of this vessel was to lead the waves into the beach and to hit the right beach at the right time. . . .

When the initial wave arrived we proceeded to the beach. The initial wave consisted of the DD tanks.[2] I am quite sure that the Germans had never seen these tanks before, and we were all anxious to see how they would perform. The weather was rough, and we were not sure whether it was possible to launch the tanks or not. However, the high echelon decided to launch them regardless. . . .

For the next 20 minutes we proceeded . . . with very little occurring. Upon reaching about 5,000 yards from the beach the coastal batteries opened fire upon us with shells that seemed to hit about 30 yards off the starboard quarter. I knew immediately that they had our range and the next one would probably hit us, which it did. It hit us right in the starboard side aft midships.[3] The ship immediately took a 20-degree list to starboard with the fantail under the water.

The order was not given to abandon ship for we felt that we might be able to save it. However, two minutes later the ship took a 90-degree roll and the order was given to abandon ship and all hands walked over the side as though you could walk over a treadmill. . . .

We all realized it was impossible for anyone to pick us up at this time for all the waves that passed us had a specific job to do and we did not want to stop them; so actually we were cheering them to the beach as they passed by. We realized that we would eventually be picked up.

Torpedoed in the Channel

Lieutenant (junior grade) C. B. Stanley, commanding officer, *LST-376*

We started out again on the afternoon of June the 8th, for the second trip across the channel. We had no difficulty on this trip up until about 1 o'clock in the morning. We met another convoy returning from Normandy. It was necessary to show emergency turning masthead lights in order to get around this convoy. It's possible that E-boats saw those lights.[4]

At any rate, we were traveling along about 20 miles offshore at 2:30, five LSTs in column, when *LST-314* suddenly exploded. . . . We set general quarters immediately. About the time all our stations had been manned, four minutes after *LST-314* was hit, we were also hit by a torpedo.

It was said later that the torpedoes were from E-boats. We never saw an E-boat either before or after the explosion. The torpedo seemed to come from the starboard side. . . .

At the time of the explosion, we had . . . trucks, and other armored vehicles on both the tank deck and the main deck. It's possible that there was an oil fire because fire flamed up immediately on the main deck about the after cargo hatch. It appeared that about half the vehicles on deck exploded immediately, they were all carrying jerry cans of gasoline, they were all carrying some kind of ammunition. The gasoline and ammuni-

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***LCI(L)-85* sinks in the transport area off Omaha Beach on D-Day.**

tion both were exploding. We had no means of fighting the fire, no auxiliary power.

All our communications were cut. It was necessary to abandon ship. . . . One boat was blown off the ship in the explosion, the second boat was jammed by debris on the cables. However, we finally got about two or three wounded men loaded into the second boat and lowered this boat into the water. . . . We managed to get the boat into the forward area so as to use it in rescuing other men who were on life rafts and in the water.

A British destroyer that was escorting us came back and stood by to pick up survivors. Of course it was dark, the sea was fairly rough, pretty hard to see a lot of the survivors. . . .

We kept picking up men, finally got about 40 in the boat, took them over to the destroyer and loaded them aboard. Of course, the destroyer had no motor boats of its own, so we went back after another load of men. We kept doing this until around 7 o'clock in the morning. I don't know the exact number of men we picked up, estimated it to be somewhere around 90 men altogether from both the *LST-314* and the *LST-375*.

Sunk by a Near Miss

Lieutenant William E. Becker, engineering officer, *LCI(L)-219*[5]

On June 5, we left Plymouth for the invasion of Normandy. We landed there on June 6, and went in on the 17th wave, about 10 o'clock in the morning. . . . After unloading our troops, we took aboard the commander of LST Flotilla Ten. Our job was to take care of the barges and Rhino ferries, which was supposed to take one day. It turned out we kept the commander aboard for five days.

During that time, we ran over more minefields than I have ever encountered. After we ran over one, a ship would come along later and be blown. We went to the rescue of an LST, and about a hundred yards from where we had just passed, a coastal steamer went by and in three minutes flat he was at the bottom from these mines we had run over. So you can see how fortunate we were up to this period. . . .

But on the morning of D plus 5, June 11, we were over at Omaha Beach, which was out of our territory, to pick up some men to bring over to Utah, which was our territory. About 3:45 in the morning, we had an air raid. It was one of those surprise jobs. It did not give the men on watch time to ring the alarm. The bomb that hit us landed about ten feet from the side of the ship, about one point abaft the beam. It knocked me out of my bunk. At the moment, I didn't know what happened, but through instinct I grabbed my helmet and my life preserver, but forgot my shoes.

I went out to my battle station, and the men I saw coming out of the crew's quarters were all injured, so I made a dash to the engine room, and the engineer said that the generators were out and there was fire. When I looked, the engine room was full of smoke. There was nothing that we could do as all our pumps were powerless. We needed assistance. I reported to the commanding officer at that time, and he asked me to look throughout the ship to see what else was wrong. I counted four fires. . . .

We were so busy getting out the injured men and trying to do something with these fires, that the fires got the best of us. The decks began to get hot. At 4, a PC came alongside to take off our injured men . . . and we were fortunate in getting a fire rescue party aboard. . . . The fire rescue party from the *PC-1291* took our handy billy pumps . . . and proceeded to put the fire under control to the extent that we could have a look around.

The side of the ship where the bomb hit, and also fore and aft for a distance of about 25 feet, was full of holes of about eight or nine inches in diameter. At that time, the water was coming in slowly, but the more water coming in, the more we listed to port. In about an hour and a half from the time that we got this near miss, the ship finally turned over. Fortunately, we were able to get every man that was alive off.

'The Ship Broke in Two'

Lieutenant Commander George D. Hoffman, commanding officer, *Corry* (DD-463)

The last job for the *Corry* was participation in the invasion of the coast of France. Previous to this period, we had escorted a convoy across the Channel and upon arrival in the area led the first boat waves down the boat lane in company with the USS *Fitch* [DD-462] and *Hobson* [DD-464], this being before "H" hour. We turned off from the boat lane at about H minus 1, and took our station at about 4,000 yards from [Utah] beach to fire at selected beach targets.

However, before we left the boat lane we were being fired upon by shore batteries, so the *Fitch* and the *Corry* were about the first ships to commence firing for the invasion for purposes of self protection. After firing for 15 to 20 minutes we managed to silence the battery firing upon us, and we commenced firing at scheduled beach targets. However, fire was resumed by other batteries and we had to cease firing at the selected beach targets in order to defend ourselves. There ensued rapid continuous fire by us and rapid fire by the shore batteries because at this time our forces had laid a smoke screen that pretty well blanked out the other units of ours farther out to sea, the heavier ones, and we were being concentrated upon.

At 0633, about three minutes after H hour, we hit a mine, probably caused by high-speed maneuvers to dodge the shells . . . . In order to throw off the salvos we probably stirred up an acoustic mine. The ship broke in two. The forward fire room, forward engine room and after fire room flooded immediately, keel was broken, main deck was severed, causing a large fissure that crossed the main deck and around through the hull. . . . We put the boats over for the purpose of towing us clear of the area so we wouldn't drift ashore into enemy held territory. . . .

A couple of minutes later it became obvious that the ship was going down very fast. I gave the word to abandon ship, and we got all the men over and, then, I stepped off into the water from the main deck. All this time, the ship was being rather heavily shelled, in fact, probably the majority of the casualties occurred in the water, for as late as an hour and a half after the ship had been sunk the batteries continued to shell the men in the water. ⚓

Source: World War II Oral Histories Interviews and Statements, RG 38, Records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD. The accounts are presented with minimal editing.

1. *PC-1261* was a 175-foot steel-hull submarine chaser.
2. Modified M4A3 Shermans, amphibious DD (duplex drive) tanks featured propellers and waterproofed canvas skirts. *PC-1261*'s initial task was to lead four LCTs (landing craft, tank), each carrying four DDs, to a point several thousand yards from Utah Beach. The craft would then launch the tanks to swim ashore.
3. This occurred at approximately 0555, H minus 35. According to other accounts, *PC-1261* struck a mine.
4. E-boat was a British term for any small, fast German craft. The torpedoes that sank *LST-314* and *LST-376* were presumably launched from 105-foot S-boats, or Schnellboots.
5. *LCI(L)-219* was a 157-foot landing craft, infantry (large).