

On the Water

Stories from Maritime America

William Flury

William Flury describes the sinking of the Liberty ship SS *Jean Nicolet* by a Japanese sub in the Indian Ocean on July 2, 1944. Thirty merchant mariners, 19 members of the Navy Armed Guard, and 26 passengers were killed in this attack.

Dangerous cargo

The *Jean Nicolet* carried what you call general war cargo,

composed probably of jeeps and trucks, and things for the Burma Road.

Some of the supplies would go over the Burma Road into China.

It was fully loaded.

'Course, we had what you call deck houses, we had extra passengers on it.

composed of air force personnel, and army personnel,

and a few civilians.

I believe the crew, the merchant crew itself I think was forty-eight men,

and the rest of them are Navy Armed Guard and passengers, in the houses on deck.

The ship wasn't zigzagging,

and I personally thought that it was the thing to be doing,



because, you know, you were in a war zone.

'Course, you know, the captain
has a lot to consider.

probably schedule. We were on
our way to meet another convoy,

and things like that. And when you zigzag,
you lose time and everything.

But, he probably had his good reasons for it.

Torpedo attack

I was, when the torpedo hit,

I had just come from the mess room,
finished my duties,

and I had grabbed an apple,
and I walked out on deck.

And I laid back on the top of
number, number three hatch,

enjoying my apple and looking up.
The sun was going down

and I was relaxing.

And the torpedo hit in number three,
right under me,

and it blew me in the air.

And I got to my feet, quick as I could,
and run to the gun I was assigned to.

While I was there at the gun,
the gunner showed up.

I loaded the magazines—
I was on the anti-aircraft twenty,

20mm anti-aircraft in the gun tub,

and the Naval Armed Guard
was the gunner.

And my job was to grab the magazines,
get a wrench,

put, I believe, seventy pounds pressure on there,

probably a spring-loaded thing. And when
he needed ammunition, I'd slap it on there for him.

Anyway, I no more got to the gun
then another torpedo hit,

in, I believe, number two hatch,
up forward, or the fo'c'sle.

And there were a lot of flames
and flash from that.

And then the ship started listing,
real bad, to the starboard,

which threw our guns and everything
out of kilter.

Especially the deck guns, you know,
the five-inch back aft.

But it was dark,
it was getting dark by then.

We couldn't see anything to
shoot at, anyway, you know?

But we were on the guns,
ready to shoot if there was anything.

And like I say, the ship was
listing real bad to the starboard.

And the captain ordered abandon ship.
So I ran to a life-boat station,

and helped beel down one of the big lifeboats.
And the men all clambered down the side,

into it, and then I got into it,

and there was a mate on there, and he said, "Better man the oars," you know?

And there was two men on one oar, these great big long things, you know, about thirty men.

Something like that, in these boats.

And we were getting away from the ship in case it exploded, or whatever.

Enemy subs take survivors

The moon came up. A nice, big, yellow moon, you know, like you get in the tropics.

It's just like daylight. And we were manning the oars, and we heard a noise,

which was the engines of the sub coming.

And it was coming pretty fast, you know, and the mate says, "Put down your oars."

You know? And the sub glided up there.

And there was an English-speaking Jap—Japanese on there,

and they hollered at us to get aboard the submarine, you know? And no damned monkey-business, you know?

And, so, I looked up there, and

and there were machine guns trained on us, and pistols and everything.

We didn't have any weapons at all.

And I just— I didn't know what the hell to do, I felt really helpless, you know. You had to do what they said.

And so they took us, one at a time,
and stripped our watches,

shoes, and tied our
hands with ropes and wires.

And I noticed that they had already
picked up some survivors.

They were, back of the conning tower.

Where we were on a boat was just
about where the conning tower is,

in the middle of the submarine, by then.

And they were, took me, stripped me,
took me and tied my hands behind my back,

and set me up ahead of the conning tower,
right under the deck guns on the sub.

When they set us down on that deck, they
told us to keep our heads bowed down.

And, I looked up, kind-a, you know,
to glance around, see what was going on.

I didn't notice that Japanese dude behind me.

And he slammed me in the
back of the head with something.

And he grabbed me, by my front shirt,
and started working on me with his right fist.

And there was another that came over,
and he started kicking me.

Brutality of the captors

They had been taking men from up forward
back behind the conning tower.

Yelling and screaming, and all this.

And all of a sudden, I heard this hissing.
You know, this air hissing.

And, God, it dawned on me that they
were going to submerge, you know?

Which they did.
And I started getting to my feet,

which my legs were cramped, and
I was having a time to, have, get up,

and this big wall of water
just come and hit me,

and just slap me right against
the back of the conning tower—

or back of the—front of the gun.

And I kind of got hooked underneath
that gun while it was going down,

you know, the force
of the water and everything.

And finally, I kind of rolled to the side or something
and got loose of whatever it was.

And then I kicked my way,
I kicked my way up to the surface.

This was a long ways, but I made it,
and I got my nose up there,

and, it seemed like a long ways,
but I got up there.

I had my hands tied behind me, still,

and I was laying back, getting my nose
up in the water and kicking,

and trying not to inhale water.

And I was treading water that way

for quite some time.

And it was pitch black at this time,
and the only thing you could see was the ship,
still floating and burning in the distance.

And I was trying to get my air,
my breath, the best I could,

and a fellow came up out of the dark.

He heard me splashing, I guess, or something.

Anyway, he came over and
he asked me if I was untied.

And I said, “No, I wasn’t,”
and he untied me.

So the both of us swam around, trying
to find and release people. All that we could.

Sharks

Oh, I heard screams all the
time, throughout the night.

The sharks were getting a lot of people.
I swam for, oh, I don’t know,
maybe an hour or so,

and I run onto another guy, who is a navy
personnel – an armed guard from the *Nicolet*.

And we swam together, and he was getting
cramps regularly through the night,

and I would go over and hold him up
and help him and drag him along,

so he could rest a little bit, and things like that,
throughout the night, all night long.

Well, I personally didn’t get in contact
with a shark, but a lot of the men did.

They took a heck of a toll.

You could hear them screaming,
screams all night.

I thought about sharks. I still do.

It's a fear there, I'll tell you,
it's a big one.

You can't see anything around you, and
you know that they're in the water with you.

And there's nothing you can do to prevent 'em
from taking you if they want 'em.

It was just pure luck that I got through,

you know, the way I did.
It was just absolute luck.

I was all the time
swimming towards the ship,

it was burning in the distance, you know?

It's all I had—
it's all we had to swim for.

I held this guy up when he had cramps,
and we swam together through the night.

And the sun came up, and the ship,
the Jean Nicolet, was still burning.

We were still swimming towards it,

and later, I could see it going down.

It went down bow first,
and you could see the propeller.

And it just went down.

And it left me with a
sense of loneliness and—

way out there in the middle of the ocean.

Life raft spotted

When I'd get to the top of a swell,

I would turn around and
look around quick as I could,

to see if I could see anything, you know?

And I was doing that. And at one turn, like
that, I thought I saw something, you know?

So when the next swell lifted me up, I
concentrated on that area over there, you know.

And there was something over there.

So I started, I changed course a little bit,
and started swimming over towards this.

And as I got closer, every time,
on the top of a swell,

I finally saw that there was three,
looked like three or four guys on a raft,

You know, well, hey, man, this is good time!

So I swam right over there and
I told the navy guy there, you know,

he'd seen it, too, and I said, "Well,
looks like we got something over there."

And he just took right out,
boy, like he was in a relay race

all of a sudden, you know. I don't know
where the hell he got all his energy,

you know, but he got it. I mean, he was—

Anyway, I finally got to the raft,
and it was,

it was really neat. I mean, it was a good sized raft. It was one that had barrels in it, with wooden top and bottom, so no matter which way it fell in the water, you could still get into the containers inside, see.

And we had water in there, and food, and we even had some fishing gear—hook, and a, some pork rind for bait, and a canvas glove, you know,

you could maybe use it for a hand-line, you know.

Well, being on a, on a life raft after swimming all night is like a first rate hotel.

I'd been on the raft long enough, you know, rested pretty good, you know,

and there was different flotsam—debris floating around, and

I looked out and I seen a rolling pin from the galley floating out there,

about thirty yards or something like that, you know.

And I kept looking at it, you know, and damn! That'd sure, sure be nice to take home,

you know? If I ever got out of this.

And damn, I don't know. I didn't think, I just dove over the side of the raft,

and I swam out there, and I grabbed ahold of that rolling pin like that,

and I looked down in the water and my God!

There was the biggest shark—
just scared the heck out of me.

The rolling pin went one way,
and man I'll tell you,

I took out swimming,

I must have had a rooster-tail behind me,
'cause I was really moving.

And I hit that raft with my hands like that so fast,
I felt like I was going over the other side of it.

And damn if those guys didn't start laughing!

You know? And heh—!

Looking on it now, maybe it is funny,

but, my God!

My gosh, you know, that was really—

trauma time, there.

I mean, I think that shark scared me about,

just about as bad as—
or worse than the Japanese!

Rescue and aftermath

This sub chaser took us to their base,

which was in the Maldiv Islands,
which is a string of islands close,
off the shore of India.

And we were in sick-bay there, resting, and
I stayed all night in the hospital.

I woke up the next morning.

They brought in some hot tea, and I was
shaking so bad, I couldn't hold the tea.

And I couldn't understand that, you know?

And it was my nerves, were just—
had it. I just—you know.

It, you keep yourself up, tense and high
for so long, when your body does relax,

I guess it just—
pure exhaustion, you know?

I had bad nightmares,
a long time. Years.

About the situation,
the situation I went through,

and also the dread of
the sharks in my mind.

And—things like that.

And it's something that is
always with you, you know?

You forget some of it,
but you never forget it.

You never will. And I'll personally
never forget things like that.

You know, it's not,

you have to learn to deal with it
the best you can.

It's all any man can do.

FINISH