

# The Sinking of the Liscome Bay

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The story of 23 terrible minutes on a baby flat-top after it was torn to pieces by a torpedo from a Japanese sub. and before it sank with the second largest Navy casualty list of this war.

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**T**HE baby flat-top *Liscome Bay* was sunk by a torpedo from an enemy submarine on the day before Thanksgiving of 1943. The *Liscome Bay* was on her first battle assignment, covering the occupation of Makin in the Gilberts.

The submarine attack was a complete surprise. It was the *Liscome Bay's* third day of the invasion, and her crew had lost the tenseness that goes with the beginning of a landing operation. By this time they were relaxed, and only their standard occupational alertness remained. The scuttlebutt reported that the nearest enemy ships were two days away.

The torpedo struck a half-hour before dawn, and it was still dark when the *Liscome Bay* sank.

General quarters had sounded at 0505, in keeping with the strict custom of sending men to their battle stations at dawn and dusk in combat zones. Five minutes later a lookout shouted: "Christ, here comes a torpedo!"

It struck near the stern on the port side, and the havoc was instant and complete. The whole after section broke quickly into flames, and most of the crew stationed there died instantly.

The casualty list for the *Liscome Bay* was the second largest of any Navy vessel in the war. The complement for baby flat-tops has never been revealed, but they probably carry about half the 2,000 men allotted to big aircraft carriers. Only 260 were saved.

Ironically, many of those men who died in the after end of the *Liscome Bay* might have been saved if they hadn't been called to battle stations before the torpedo struck. They would have been asleep in the crews' quarters forward.

**R**OBERT JOSEPH CHARTERS Y1c had been in the Navy for six years. He had hoped to marry his girl before leaving San Diego, but in the hurried days before sailing he never found the time.

The weather was hot in the Makin area, and when Charters hit the sack at midnight on the *Liscome Bay* he simply lay down naked. He arose when GQ sounded at 0505 and put on his dungarees and the comfortable Marine shoes he had bought before leaving San Diego. Then he left for the office where he stood duty watches and general quarters.

It was the small office of Lt. Comdr. W. W. Carroll, who served the ship as first lieutenant, a detail involving the berthing of the crew and the care of all loose equipment. During battle Mr. Carroll became damage-control officer, and it was through this post that all damage-control parties were directed. At these times Charters served as a talker, wearing the usual headset. The three men stationed in the office during the day—Mr. Carroll; his assistant, a jg, and Charters—were joined during battle alerts by a seaman named Galliano. He manned battle phones connected to the bridge circuit.

**T**HE others were already in the office when Charters arrived at 0508, five minutes before the torpedoing. He noted with amusement that Mr. Carroll was reading "The Virginian." Mr.

## The Sinking of the Liscome Bay

Carroll was very fond of the book. He always read it at morning general quarters but never during the day. He had almost finished reading the book when it was torn from his hand by the explosion at 0513.

The hit was farther aft and on the opposite side of the ship, but the blast was so great that it tore off Charters' life jacket, dungaree shirt, battle phones and even his marine shoes. The lights went out. He remained in his stocking feet the rest of his time aboard the *Liscome Bay*.

The first voice was that of the jg. He said to Charters: "Are you all right?" Charters answered "Yes" and then said to Mr. Carroll: "Are you all right?" There was no answer. He asked again. There was a pause, and then the commander said: "I'm all right." Galliano said "I'm okay" without being asked.

Flames from the hangar deck were visible overhead. Mr. Carroll felt for the doorway. "We've got to get up pressure to fight the fires," he said.

They groped outside to the passage but could not get up pressure on the hose. Charters looked at Mr. Carroll and said: "There's an awful gassy smell down here." The officer, struggling desperately with the valves to get up pressure, paid no attention. Finally Charters said: "This is no place for us. We better get out." Mr. Carroll turned away reluctantly from the valves and followed Charters without saying a word.

Three or four more men joined them and they went forward, losing each other once and finally collecting together again far forward at the base of the burning elevator shaft. There they found a warrant bosun named Hunt on his hands and knees, emptying a portable CO2 extinguisher on the flames. Beside him lay three other extinguishers that he had already emptied.

Mr. Carroll said to Hunt: "Come on, Boats. Get the hell outta here." Without moving, Hunt motioned them to go. The other men glanced at Mr. Carroll to see if he was going to order Hunt out. It was then that they noticed for the first time that Mr. Carroll was covered with blood. He had been hit badly across the face and chest during the first explosion. The doctor was in the group, and he offered to dress Mr. Carroll's wounds, but Mr. Carroll refused.

They all went topside, coming out on the walk-away around the flight deck. Looking back, they could see that the after section of the ship was almost totally destroyed. All around them 20-mm and 40-mm shells were exploding.

Mr. Carroll told them to jump. Charters walked to the side and leaped off, completely unafraid of the great height and anxious only to get away from the bursting ammunition. In the water he looked back and saw that everybody had jumped except Mr. Carroll. He was walking up and down the flight deck, ordering others to jump and helping some men over the side.

Back inside the ship, Bosun Hunt finally gave up at the fire extinguishers and came on deck. He met Mr. Carroll again. But this time, instead of Mr. Carroll urging Hunt to go, Hunt urged Mr. Carroll to leave the ship.

"Come on," the bosun said. "Let's go."

"No," Mr. Carroll replied. "You go. I'm going to stay."

"I'm not going without you. I'll get you a life preserver."

"No," Mr. Carroll said. "Go home to your wife and kids."

"If you're not going, I'm not," Hunt said. He walked across the flight deck toward the exploding ammunition, looking for an extra life jacket.

"Come on back," shouted Mr. Carroll. "Don't go back there—I'll jump with you."

The doctor came up and joined them, and together the three of them cleared the side of the ship. Mr. Carroll's condition was getting worse. The doctor held him up while Hunt swam off to retrieve a life raft. When Hunt came back, he asked how Mr. Carroll was, and the doctor looked down at the man in his arms.

"He's dead," he said.

Charters was a survivor of the *Liscome Bay*. He came back to the mainland and married his girl on Christmas Eve. They are living in San Diego now, where he has landed a job as a chief yeoman at the Naval Air Station.

**A** REAR admiral and two captains were on the *Liscome Bay*. The rear admiral was Henry M. Mullinix, and he was in charge of the air group operating from the *Liscome Bay* and two sister carriers in the area. One of the two captains was John G. Crommelin Jr., who served as chief of

## The Sinking of the Liscome Bay

staff to the admiral. The other was Irving D. Wilt-sie, and he was captain of the *Liscome Bay*.

Rear Adm. Mullinix, a kind, friendly man, was in air plot when the explosion came, and he was badly injured. Several people saw him there with his head on his folded arms, but others reported seeing him later swimming in the flame-swept waters. He did not survive.

Capt. Crommelin, one of five famous brothers who are all Navy officers, had just stepped from the shower when the torpedo hit. Naked and wet, he was badly burned. Still without clothes, he walked out onto the flight deck and directed the abandoning in his area. Later, he jumped overboard himself, then swam for an hour and 20



Looking up, Roach saw that the man had on a life jacket, grabbed him by the feet and threw him in the water. Then he proceeded down.

minutes before a destroyer picked him up.

Capt. Wilt-sie survived the original explosion. Concerned by the damage aft and the men who were stationed there, he walked toward the stern on the flight deck to inspect the area. Several officers called to him to come back, but he walked into the exploding ammunition and smoke. He was not seen again.

**C**LOVIS (C.M.) ROACH was a storekeeper first class on the *Liscome Bay* but, like Yeoman Charters, he has since been promoted to chief. He is a Texan, is slight and wispy in appearance and has thinning blond hair. He looks like Ernie Pyle must have looked when he was 26.

Some months before, Roach had been a member of the crew of the *USS San Francisco* during her famous battle off Guadalcanal. Standing

## The Sinking of the Liscome Bay

far below decks, passing ammunition while shells tore into the ship, he learned that battle is a serious business and fear a very real thing.

The *San Francisco* was a heavy cruiser, and he liked the security of her thick-skinned sturdiness. The *Liscome Bay's* light metal construction scared him. He decided that he would go below decks only when he had to.

So at 2100 the night before the torpedoing, Roach went to sleep on a cot on the fantail as usual. Reveille next morning awakened him 20 minutes before general quarters and 28 minutes before the torpedo struck.

Roach went down to the galley and bake shop where he talked with his buddies among the cooks and bakers. He munched a coffee ring, drank a cup of coffee and shot the breeze about who was on duty the night before. Several of the men were bitching about the lack of action. "I've seen it calm like this before," said Roach. "Something'll happen. It always does when it's calm." Then GQ sounded, and he headed forward to his battle station. He was wearing dungarees, a hat, regular Navy oxfords and carrying his life preserver under his arm.

Roach's battle station was in the forward issue room, and it was his duty to hand out emergency issues of flight and engine gear during battle. But the forward issue room was two decks down, and because of his aversion to being below decks he didn't go there. He went instead to sick bay, two decks above the issue room but astride the sole passage leading below. It had become his habit to stay there during GQ unless he spotted someone heading below with a request. Then he would accompany the man below, issue the requested material and come back up to sick bay. Roach's statement on the subject is very succinct: "As long as it's necessary to stay below, I'll stay there, but if it's not necessary I won't."

Five men had battle stations in sick bay: the ship's doctor, a chief pharmacist's mate and three other pharmacist's mates. They were there when Roach arrived, and everyone exchanged morning greetings. With a second-class pharmacist's mate Roach went into the treatment room. He sat on the table, and the mate sat on a chair against a bulkhead. While they were talking about their mission against Makin and speculating on the success of the joint operation against Tarawa farther south, the torpedo struck.

The bulkhead behind the treatment table blew inward, striking Roach on the back and knocking him 10 feet through the door. He got up and yelled: "There may be another one." Then he hit the deck again. Another explosion followed, somewhat less violent than the first, and Roach got to his feet. So did the others, and in a general melee of voices they all established that they were still alive. Roach groped his way back into the treatment room, searching for his life jacket. He found it in the dust and rubble on the deck, 15 feet from where he had laid it beside him on the treatment table.

Almost involuntarily the men looked down the passages leading from sick bay. One was on the port side and one was on the starboard, but both were blocked by debris and flames from the hangar deck. As a matter of personal interest, Roach also looked down the hatch leading to the forward issue room. It was utterly impassable. He went back and tried the port and starboard passages again without success.

The list of the ship, the smoke and flames, and the lack of communication made it obvious to everyone that it was time to get out if a way could be found. Roach spoke up. "I'm going to try working my way forward along the port passageway to the first-division compartment," he said. "Anybody want to come?" Without waiting for an answer he started forward. He could hear others following him, but he didn't look back to see who or how many there were.

All the bulkheads were blown in. He climbed and crawled around them. He squirmed through a hole so small that he scraped off a shoe. Finally there was only one man left behind him. Together they made it through to the first-division compartment. They found it slightly damaged and empty and knew there must be a way out. To Roach it was the first clear sign that he was likely to be a survivor. Following a trail of fresh air he climbed two ladders and came out on the high (starboard) side.

He paused and took a few deep breaths. Flames and smoke were curling up the flight deck and he knew he couldn't abandon there. He went

## The Sinking of the Liscome Bay

down to the port side. By the light of the flames he could see heads bobbing in the water. No rafts were visible, but someone behind him said: "There are three rafts and a floater net way out there."

Roach was a lone operator. He left the others on the deck and walked forward to the anchor chain. Tightening his life jacket around his chest, he crawled over the gunwale and lowered himself slowly down the chain. He had descended about 10 feet when another man, with the same intentions but more speed, climbed down on his shoulders. Looking up, Roach saw that the man had on a life jacket, grabbed him by the feet and threw him in the water.

Then Roach proceeded down the chain to the anchor and dropped six feet into the water. He took off his remaining shoe and started to swim, but his life jacket held him back as flames whipped around the bow. Only a change in the wind saved him from burns. He swam out to the floater net and climbed on with about 40 others. Someone shouted: "There she goes." He looked back to see the flames perish as the ship slid beneath the waves. He felt no regret at her passing.

There was one man on the *Liscome Bay* who abandoned ship twice. Gunner's Mate Hubert Bassett crawled down a Jacob's ladder forward on the port side, near where Storekeeper Roach went in via the anchor chain. The wind was unkind to Bassett, and he soon found himself ringed by flame. He swam back to the Jacob's ladder and reboarded the ship. The oil gradually burned off the surface, and Bassett climbed down again and swam away.

**W**HEN Robert H. Carley was a junior at Occidental College in Los Angeles he found YMCA work so interesting he decided to enter the ministry. He stayed one more year at Occidental, made the All-Southern Cal basketball team and then went to Princeton Theological Seminary. After graduating from there he went directly into the Navy. Young, blond and handsome, he looked like a recruiting-poster officer.

Lt. (jg) Carley was the *Liscome Bay's* chaplain. He was in the head when the explosion came. By the time he raised himself from among the broken sinks, toilets and urinals, he decided that his first job was to find his life jacket and kit of personal belongings. The search was hopeless, and he had to leave the gear under the porcelain dust and broken pipes.

As he stepped outside into the passageway someone brushed past him. It was one of the two patients who were confined to sick bay recovering from appendectomies. The one who passed him was a pilot who had been operated on five days before. Although not a good swimmer, he rushed up to the flight deck, jumped over the side and swam several hundred yards to a raft. He was a survivor. The other patient had been brought over from a destroyer two days before to have his operation. He survived the original explosion and was able to walk out of sick bay, but he was not seen again. He was not a survivor.

The next person on the scene was Dr. Rowe. "We've got to get the patients out of sick bay," he said, but the chaplain told him they were gone. Mr. Carroll, still searching for a way to put out the fires, came up with several others. There was a little talk. In the back of everyone's mind was the thought of the 180,000 gallons of high-octane gasoline stored directly beneath them. Smoke and a strong smell of gasoline filled the area. Some of the men started to get sick and groped their way forward and topside.

As Chaplain Carley went through the aerographer's office he stumbled. Something in his mind said "life jacket" and he stooped down, identified it and put it on. Then he went out onto the high side walkaway.

Looking forward he saw that three officers—Dr. Rowe, Mr. Carroll and the nude Capt. Crommelin—had the situation under control, so he headed aft. All around the chaplain 20-mm. and 40-mm shells were exploding, but he was so glad to be out from below that they didn't faze him.

He came upon three men huddled around a machine gun and went up to them. They were dead. Farther aft he found three other men dazedly standing by another gun, and he told them to abandon. They went down a rope, and he followed them into the water.

Later, as he was being hauled onto a destroyer, he heard someone addressing him.

"Well, Padre," said the voice, "I see religion paid off."

**M**ost of the men in the stewards branch on the Navy are Negroes. They wait on tables, serve

## The Sinking of the Liscome Bay

as orderlies and work in the officers' galleys.

There was an unusual messman on the *Liscome Bay*. The son of an impoverished farmer near Waco, Tex., he had joined the Navy to help his family earn a living.

It was on the ill-fated *Arizona* that he became famous. During the Pearl Harbor attack he rushed to the bridge and manned a machine gun, firing it through the explosions and devastation around him.

For this action Dorie Miller won the Navy Cross.

In the Negro world Dorie Miller became an idol. There were fan clubs organized for him and songs written about him. His mother was brought up from Waco for a big rally in Harlem. She spoke to the people there.

"I just got a letter from Dorie," she said. "He don't write much. But he said he thought he'd be home around 1945...."

Dorie Miller was in the after section of the *Liscome Bay* and was not a survivor.



**YANK**  
JUNE 11, 1944: p. 8

