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# SET AND DRIFT

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## Friendly Fire Incidents during World War II Naval Operations

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Eleanor D. Gauker and Christopher G. Blood

**O**PERATION DESERT STORM and subsequent military operations have highlighted the reality of “friendly fire” casualties as part of the human toll of combat, peacekeeping, and training. The accidental nature of these incidents tends to heighten rather than lessen public concern.<sup>1</sup> Friendly fire is a fact of life on the battlefield; it has occurred in every war.<sup>2</sup> Desert Storm, however, was unique in this respect: technology brought home to the public the war as it was happening and allowed accurate assessment of what weapons were inflicting damage.

Although Desert Storm was primarily an air and ground operation, future U.S. operations may well focus on the sea. Therefore, our naval forces must maintain a state of readiness for any type of operational situation. In this post-Cold War era it is likely that the U.S. Navy will engage in littoral, shallow-water, and amphibious operations rather than in the open-ocean warfare seen in the past.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of circumstances, if U.S. ships become victims of friendly fire, the human, financial, and operational costs may be high.

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Although today's ships are equipped with the latest radar and electronic warfare equipment, no recent large-scale naval combat operations have fully tested their vulnerability to friendly fire. Nevertheless, during Desert Storm, for example, even with an overwhelming allied force and virtually no naval opposition from the Iraqis, the battleship *Missouri* (BB 63) was "raked by friendly fire," demonstrating that such incidents can and do happen despite high-technology equipment, air superiority, and an emphasis on ground operations.<sup>4</sup>

With this in mind, the authors conducted an examination of incidents in which U.S. ships were damaged or sunk as a result of U.S. or Allied weaponry during World War II, the last major naval conflict. This historical perspective may promote better understanding of the nature of friendly fire at sea and the circumstances surrounding it.

### The Analysis and Results

The *United States Naval Chronology, World War II*, prepared by the Naval History Division of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, lists the daily occurrences of damage to and loss of vessels in that war.<sup>5</sup> For this analysis, for each incident of damage to U.S. ships by American or Allied weapons, the date, hull number, and name of vessel have been extracted. Collisions, groundings, and other accidents were excluded, as was deliberate destruction to prevent damaged ships from falling into enemy hands (e.g., the USS *Lexington* (CV 2)). Additionally, although there were many instances where U.S. ships were hit by both enemy and friendly fire (e.g., the USS *Albert W. Grant* (DD 649) during the battle of Surigao Strait), these incidents were not included due to the difficulty of determining the precise details and consequences. Also not reviewed were the many instances of naval aircraft losses due to friendly fire, such as the shooting down of USS *Enterprise* (CV 6) aircraft at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, or of Lieutenant Commander Edward H. "Butch" O'Hare by his wingman on the night of 26 November 1943. Historical narratives offered anecdotal information about the ships, such as type of engagement, amount of air and naval gunfire, enemy activity, and weather.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the authors ascertained the type of duty the affected ship was assigned to, such as picket duty, screening, escort, or patrol. Previous research had examined the number of ships and casualties involved in various naval operations, and from its results the numbers of wounded in action (WIA) and killed in action (KIA) could be determined for each event.<sup>7</sup>

In fifty-three incidents, U.S. vessels were damaged or sunk by Allied weaponry. Of these, 32 percent (seventeen ships) were destroyers, 11 percent (six vessels) were PT boats, and 11 percent (five LSTs and one LSD) were landing ships. Other damaged ships included three battleships, four aircraft carriers (including one light carrier), one heavy and two light cruisers, two submarines, three minesweepers,

a hospital ship, and various other support vessels including cargo, transport, and salvage vessels.

As table 1 shows, the number of friendly fire incidents increased with the intensity of World War II naval operations. Three events took place in 1942, two in 1943, eight in 1944; fully 75 percent (forty) of the incidents happened in 1945. The Okinawa campaign alone accounted for twenty-two incidents, or 42 percent of the total for the entire war. The casualties for the friendly fire episodes reported in the present investigation, as shown in table 2, were 186 killed and 438 wounded.

Table 3 shows the tactical situations that resulted in friendly fire incidents. Ships participating in assault-landing operations involving large numbers of vessels, such as those in the Pacific islands, were most vulnerable to friendly fire and accounted for twenty-five incidents. Of these, thirteen ships involved in bombardment and screening were hit, while landing, logistic, and medical vessels accounted for twelve incidents. In addition, the ferocity of opposed amphibious landings made impossible any attempt to record accidental firing upon the innumerable landing craft and assault vehicles engaged in ship-to-shore operations; there were, undoubtedly, a great many small craft hit and casualties caused by friendly ships and aircraft.

Attacks, raids, and sorties were generally quick, aggressive operations mounted by carrier forces; these rapid-attack situations resulted in nine incidents. Also, six PT boats were hit by friendly fire while on patrol, as were four vessels engaged in logistics operations (such as transport or repair); three destroyers were struck on picket duty, along with three minesweepers engaged in sweeping operations. Great naval battles accounted for relatively few episodes of friendly fire. During the naval battle of Guadalcanal, 12–15 November 1942, only two such incidents were recorded, and the battle of the Philippine Sea accounted for only one.

### **“The Possibility Will Always Be Present”**

Whether they are called “friendly fire” or “fratricide,” incidents that occur as a result of mistaken action by comrades, along with the casualties they produce, have always been part of combat. Most of the attention to friendly fire has focused on ground operations, yet over six hundred casualties were sustained on ships hit by Allied weapons during World War II. As the post-Desert Storm Navy prepares to go in harm’s way in coastal waters, it is important to examine the historical occurrences of friendly fire at sea to ascertain what they may portend for the future.

The most common naval friendly-fire scenario during World War II was the landing operation. Okinawa, though the amphibious landing itself was for the

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Table 1

### Ships Hit by Friendly Gunfire during World War II

Ship Type	1942	1943	1944	1945	Total
Destroyers (DD)	3	1	2	11	17
PT Boats (PT)	0	0	4	2	6
Landing Ships (LSD, LST)	0	0	0	6	6
Carriers (CV, CVL)	0	0	0	4	4
Battleships (BB)	0	0	0	3	3
Cruisers (CA, CL)	0	0	0	3	3
Minesweepers (YMS)	0	0	0	3	3
Submarines (SS)	0	0	2	0	2
Salvage Ships (ARS)	0	1	0	1	2
Transports (APA)	0	0	0	2	2
Cargo Ships (AKA)	0	0	0	2	2
Seaplane Tenders (AV)	0	0	0	1	1
Hospital Ships (AH)	0	0	0	1	1
Patrol Craft (PC)	0	0	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>53</b>

most part unopposed, accounted for nearly half of the incidents. With over two thousand ships and landing craft participating, the waters off the beaches were crowded and smoky; battleships bombarded the shore, destroyers screened the battleships, and landing craft approached the shore under cover of gunfire. It was a scene of confusion and poor visibility, in which ships fired over other ships. That some of the naval gunfire would go astray seems, in hindsight, almost inevitable.

Mistaken identity was responsible for several friendly fire incidents. For example, four PT boats on patrol off the Bismarck archipelago were sunk by Allied aircraft (twenty-two killed and twenty-three wounded).<sup>8</sup> In another case, off Sicily, USS *Brant* (ARS 32) was disabled when inadequate recognition signals led friendly naval forces to shell that ship while it was performing salvage operations. In this incident, eight crew members were killed, and eighteen were wounded.<sup>9</sup> The submarine *Seawolf* (SS 197) was mistaken for an enemy vessel and sunk while transporting stores and army personnel; the cost of that error was eighty-three lives.<sup>10</sup>

**Table 2**  
**Casualties on Ships Hit by Allied Gunfire during World War II**

Ship Type	1942		1943		1944		1945		Total	
	WIA	KIA	WIA	KIA	WIA	KIA	WIA	KIA	WIA	KIA
Carriers	0	0	0	0	0	0	115	16	115	16
Destroyers	8	5	0	0	21	3	80	10	109	18
Battleships	0	0	0	0	0	0	99	21	99	21
Submarines	0	0	0	0	0	83	0	0	0	83
PT Boats	0	0	0	0	23	22	0	4	23	26
Landing Ships	0	0	0	0	0	0	35	3	35	3
Salvage Ships	0	0	18	8	0	0	0	6	18	14
Cruisers	0	0	0	0	0	0	21	2	21	2
Transports	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	1	8	1
Patrol Craft	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	1	6	1
Minesweepers	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	3	1
Cargo Ships	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
Seaplane Tenders	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hospital Ships	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>368</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>438</b>	<b>186</b>

One near incident of friendly fire during World War II is noteworthy because it could have changed the course of history.

In mid-November 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was traveling in secrecy aboard the battleship USS *Iowa* (BB 61) to the Teheran Conference. While the presidential party was on deck watching a firing demonstration, the battleship suddenly lurched, changed course, and sounded the general alarm. One of the escorting destroyers, during a torpedo-firing drill, had accidentally fired a live torpedo at the *Iowa* (but fortunately missed).<sup>11</sup>

Subsequent wars have also seen U.S. ships mistakenly attacked. For example, during the Korean conflict—generally viewed as primarily a ground war—the USS *Grapple* (ARS 7) was taken for an enemy vessel while on patrol and fired upon at close range, resulting in two killed and eleven wounded.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, on 15 April 1972, the USS *Worden* (DLG 18) was damaged off the coast of Vietnam by two anti-radiation missiles inadvertently fired by U.S. aircraft. One crew member was killed and nine others were seriously injured.<sup>13</sup>

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Table 3

Friendly Fire Incidents of World War II by Tactical Situation

Amphibious Landing and Assault Operations				
Tactical Situation	No. of Incidents	Types of Ships Hit	Total WIA	Total KIA
Shore Bombardment	7	BB, CL, DD	108	22
Antiaircraft, Screening	6	DD	63	8
Troop Landings	6	LST, PCS	32	4
Logistics	5	AKA, APA, AV, LSD	13	0
Medical Support	1	AH	0	0
Other Scenarios				
Tactical Situation	No. of Incidents	Types of Ships Hit	Total WIA	Total KIA
Attacks, Raids, Sorties	9	CA, CV, CVL, DD, SS	152	19
Patrol	6	PT	23	26
Logistics	4	APA, ARS, SS	23	98
Picket Duty	3	DD	7	1
Minesweeping	3	YMS	3	1
Naval Battle	3	DD	14	7

The end of the Cold War and the downsizing of forces afloat make combat operations involving vast numbers of ships increasingly unlikely.<sup>14</sup> Improvements in equipment—particularly sensors, navigation, communications systems, and identification devices—have somewhat reduced the likelihood that ships and aircraft will fire on their allies in error. In particular, secondary surveillance radar, known as the Identification Friend or Foe (IFF) system, has grown more sophisticated since it was first used in 1942.<sup>15</sup> It sends a signal to its target, seeking a properly coded response to indicate that the target is friendly. But a continuing problem with IFF (in spite of recent advances in interrogator-transponder technology) has been that of determining whether an improper response or the lack of any response indicates a hostile contact or is due to operator error or non-functioning equipment.

Notwithstanding many technological advances in recognition capabilities, the possibility of friendly fire at sea will always be present when ships embark on combat operations or exercises using live ordnance. It is almost impossible to quantify the human factor in such operations. On 17 May 1987, the USS *Stark*

(FFG 31) was the target of a mistaken attack by an Iraqi aircraft. Two Exocet missiles found their mark, resulting in thirty-seven fatalities. The *Stark's* crew did not expect to be attacked by a "friendly" aircraft and therefore did not respond defensively to the approach of the Iraqi F-1 Mirage. Given the rapid actions required in high-tempo maneuvers, friendly fire incidents at sea continue to be a very real possibility. As recently as 1992, during Nato exercises, the carrier USS *Saratoga* (CV 60) fired a Sea Sparrow missile that detonated on the bridge of the Turkish destroyer *Muavenet* (DM 357), killing the captain and four of the crew, while another fifteen were wounded.<sup>16</sup> While the *Saratoga* crew members thought they were merely simulating a missile launch, their procedures resulted in the tragic accident.

Therefore, while electronic and radar technology improvements may reduce the likelihood of friendly fire incidents, naval forces must prepare for the possibility of such events whether or not a combat situation exists. Training in defensive, offensive, and safety procedures is necessary to reduce the possibility of a "friendly" attack; but since that possibility can never be eliminated, commanders must constantly stress damage control, to keep casualties to a minimum, and medical preparedness, to provide immediate treatment for any casualties that are sustained.<sup>17</sup>

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## Notes

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15. B. Blake, ed., *Jane's Radar and Electronic Warfare Systems*, 5th ed. (Surrey, UK: Jane's Information Group, Ltd., 1993), p. 5.



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### Society for Military History Annual Meeting, 11-14 May 1995

*The SMH, formerly the American Military Institute, will hold its 1995 annual meeting 11-14 May 1995 in Gettysburg, Pa., on the theme "War Termination and Transitions to New Eras." The host will be the U.S. Army War College. Papers on such topics as concluding campaigns, conflict-ending diplomacy, military occupation and government, wars of succession, veteran status, and military establishments in transition will be presented. The emphasis will be (but not exclusively) on the period 1944-1950. For information, contact Mr. David A. Keough, SMH 1995 Meeting, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., 17013-5008; or by telephone at (717) 245-3189; by e-mail at keoughd@carlisle-emh2.army.mil.*

### Annotated Bibliography

*The U.S. Marine Corps in World War II, an annotated bibliography updating the original 1968 edition, is available from the Marine Corps Historical Center on diskette, in WordPerfect 5.1. It is also to be available on MCCAT through on-line books. The bibliography was compiled by two Center interns, Lee Gatchel and Midshipman Walter Hoysa, U.S. Naval Academy, with the guidance of the Center staff. It will be revised at regular intervals.*

*The bibliography is fifty pages in length and is arranged in broad subject categories. Diskettes are available by writing the Center library, Bldg. 58, Washington Navy Yard, 901 M St., S.E., Washington, D.C., 20374-5040.*