

Incident at Honda Point

THE LARGEST PEACETIME LOSS OF SHIPS IN NAVY HISTORY

BY DAVID F. WINKLER

Following his commissioning at the U.S. Naval Academy in the spring of 1922, Riley Richmond Jackson was detailed to the San Diego homeported destroyer USS *Fuller* (DD 297). While not as high in the pecking order as duty on battleships and cruisers, destroyer duty for newly commissioned officers was desirable due to the opportunities to gain ship-handling skills and leadership experience. A notable classmate of Jackson, Ensign Hyman G. Rickover, also received orders to another West Coast-based destroyer — the USS *La Vallette* (DD 315). Both *Clemson*-class destroyers had been laid down during World War I but would not be completed in time to serve in that conflict. In the case of *Fuller* — named for a Marine Corps Captain who paid the ultimate price at Belleau Wood — the ship would be launched on December 5, 1918, at the Bethlehem Shipbuilding Corporation yard in San Francisco and commissioned 15 months later at the end of February 1920 with Lieutenant Commander R.E. Rogers as the inaugural commanding officer.

As far as leadership experience, *Fuller* provided Jackson all he could handle and then some. Not only was he assigned responsibilities as the ship's First Lieutenant, he also served as the Gunnery and Communications Officer. In less than eight months, he was Officer of the Deck (OOD) qualified.

Thus, he took his turn on the watchbill as OOD on the evening of September 8, 1923, as *Fuller* steamed south off the coast of California with 13 other destroyers assigned to Destroyer Squadron Eleven. With his first and middle initials "R.R.," Jackson was nicknamed "Railroad" by his Naval Academy classmates, and that evening he may have felt like a conductor of a 14-car train that was hurtling south at 20 knots.

South to San Diego

Leading the column, USS *Delphy* (DD 261) served as the commodore's flagship with Captain Edward H. Watson serving in that role. With Watson having assumed

command of the squadron less than two months earlier with most of his ships undergoing maintenance, this trek from San Francisco to San Diego presented his first operational opportunity. Desiring to simulate wartime operational conditions, Watson did not slow his column as it encountered foggy conditions as day turned to night. *Delphy's* commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander Donald T. Hunter, served as Watson's squadron navigator and plotted the column's track on the chart by dead reckoning — plotting the ship's assumed position based on course and speed forward from the ship's previously known fixed position.

What Hunter did not factor in were strong eastward currents that may have been partially driven by an earthquake that hit Japan a week earlier. He also dismissed a warning from his own ship's navigator, Lieutenant Junior Grade Lawrence Blodgett, who reported a radio bearing from a shore station at Point Arguello that did not coincide with their plotted position. Hunter dismissed the report, not trusting the new radio detection finding technology.

Back on the bridge of *Fuller*, Jackson, unaware of the conversations on the flagship, had his quartermaster assign a lookout on the port bow to search for the beams of lighthouses at Point Arguello and then Point Conception. However, with ever-thickening fog, Jackson felt pessimistic about the chances of spotting the beacons. Instead, he focused on the stern light of the destroyer USS *Farragut* (DDG 99), steaming 250 yards ahead.

Known for his poise at the Naval Academy, Jackson remained calm as the fog thickened. His commanding officer napped fully dressed in the emergency cabin transom located just aft of the bridge. With an anticipated course change at 9 p.m. to port to enter the Santa Barbara Channel, Jackson waited for the change to occur before awakening the skipper.

Jackson would write:

At about 8:50 I sighted a steady white light over the port bow,

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U.S. destroyers, which were wrecked at Honda Point, 8 September 1923: USS *Chauncey* (DD-296), USS *S.P. Lee* (DD-310), USS *Fuller* (DD-297), USS *Woodbury* (DD-309), and USS *Nicholas* (DD-312).

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USS *S. P. Lee* (DD-310) and another unidentified destroyer run aground at Honda Point.

low on the water. The quartermaster put a glass on it and reported that the next ahead of the *Farragut* (*Woodbury*) had turned to the left. The *Farragut* then began to turn, following her next ahead.

Jackson ordered left rudder to follow in *Farragut*'s wake. Steadying on the new course, he sent the quartermaster to awaken the Captain. Jackson noted changes in speed from full, to ahead two thirds, to stop, and then back

one third. As *Farragut* changed speeds, Jackson directed his engine order telegraph operator to mimic what the ship was doing. As the "back one third order was passed down, the Captain appeared on the bridge, Jackson began to discuss the speed changes, and then the situation changed dramatically.

Jackson explained:

Three things happened simultaneously. First, I saw a ship ahead of us cross our bow about 180 yards away. Second, I saw a destroyer on her side, half submerged and lit up by a red glow on our starboard bow about 350 yards away. Third, I felt a tremor over the ship.

Jackson then noted the ship ahead was backing down on them. The Captain yelled: "All engines astern, full speed," and then "Rudder, hard right!"

Impact!

It was too late. The water tender on watch reported to Jackson that the forward fire room had taken on four feet of water and steam was escaping into the compartment. Unable to implement the full astern order, *Fuller* surged ahead and hit *Farragut* at frame 64 before backing down. With that, the Chief Engineer reported that water was beginning to flood the aft engine room. Jackson assumed his First Lieutenant duties and directed his Chief Boatswain's Mate to get the crew mustered topside and distribute life jackets as the ship listed 30 degrees to starboard. As the Gunnery Officer, Jackson worried that the pounding of the heavy seas against the beached bow could detonate shells in the forward magazine. He first received permission to flood the forward magazines and then, as an additional precautionary measure, flooded the aft magazines.

Given the ship's doomed predicament, the priority turned to getting the crew off safely. The same scenario

played out on the other six destroyers that had run onto the rocks of Honda Point — also called Point Pedernales — just north of the entrance leading into the Santa Barbara Channel. Lead ship *Delphy* had been first to plow into the rocks running at full speed. The impact would lead to three fatalities. Seeing *Delphy* come to a full stop, *S.P. Lee* turned left only to run aground on the coast. In *S.P. Lee*'s wake, *Young* hit submerged rocks that sliced into her hull, leading to rapid flooding capsizing the ship onto her starboard side, snuffing out the lives of 20 more Bluejackets. *Nicholas*, *Woodbury*, and *Chauncey* also ran aground; *Chauncey* had avoided the initial collision with land, but attempts to rescue Sailors off the other grounded ships led to her grounding. The final ships in the column, aware of the navigational issues, did not turn and simply slowed. Of note, *Farragut*, the ship that Jackson had trailed into harm's way, managed to extricate herself from the rocks. No further fatalities would be recorded in what became a massive rescue effort.

Rescue Effort

In the case of *Woodbury*, crewmembers simply climbed down a line affixed to a large rock that the bow rested against. With the ship relatively close, futile attempts were made to run lines by boat over to that stricken destroyer, but the rough seas were too much for *Fuller*'s small boats to handle at night. Finally, in the morning, *Fuller*'s skipper climbed down to the small rock perched against his ship, entered the water, and swam a distance of 100 yards to the large rock adjacent to *Woodbury*.

Jackson observed:

Having demonstrated it was possible to swim across this place, he had the executive officer send a man across with a heaving line. The Fuller's crew then began to go from the small rock to the larger one, one by one, each man pulling himself along the heaving line hand over hand.

Jackson and two other ensigns inspected the ship to make sure the evacuation had been complete and then pulled themselves to the big rock. On the leeward side of



Captain John G. Church with a crew of six enlisted men and one Chief Boatswain's mate appraising the situation at Honda Point from the bluffs. Note: the breeches buoy next to the men, and the wreckage of a destroyer in the background.

U.S. Naval Institute Photo Archive

the big rock, motor whaleboats from *Fuller* and survivors *Somers* and *Percival* shuttled the crew to a larger civilian craft, which ferried them out to those two destroyers for transport home to San Diego.

The incident would become known as the Honda Point disaster and would claim the record for the largest peacetime loss of Navy ships.

Captain Watson would accept full responsibility. At a subsequent court-martial, Watson would be stripped of seniority, and three other officers would be admonished. As for Jackson, he would eventually leave active duty and join the Naval Reserve. With the Naval Reserve activated in the summer of 1941, now Lieutenant Commander Jackson found himself in October on the oiler *Sabine* en route to Pearl Harbor. He would serve throughout that conflict ending up at Saipan in command of the Saipan Patrol and Escort Unit. Leaving active duty, Jackson would eventually settle in San Diego, where he resided until his death in 1975.

Of note at the time, his classmate, now Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, remained on active duty and would remain so until 1982. However, the Jackson Navy bloodline would outlast Rickover as Jackson's son Dempster McKee (USNA Class of '52) retired as a rear admiral in 1983 and Jackson's grandson David (USNA Class of '79) served into the 21st century, retiring as a Captain. ■

Dr. Winkler is the editor of the weekly naval history e-letter Tuesday Tidings which can be found at www.seahistory.org.