

Great Ships of The U. S. Navy

U.S.S. William D. Porter

by Mike Prero

Commissioned on July 6, 1943, the *U.S.S. William D. Porter* was one of the war's many assembly-line ships, smaller than some, but boasting several heavy and light guns and ten deadly torpedoes that carried 500-pound warheads. Her captain was Commander Wilfred Walter, already identified as an officer who was destined to go places...but just where, the Navy could not possibly have imagined!

The *Porter's* first major assignment was as escort for the, then, huge, new battleship *Iowa*. The night before leaving Norfolk, bound for North Africa, the *Porter* accidentally damaged a sister ship by backing down along the other ship's side. Her anchor tore down railings, life rafts, ship's boat, and other pieces of equipment. Little did anyone realize that this was to be only the beginning.

The very next day, as the four-ship convoy tried to slip quietly through a known U-boat feeding ground, an ear-splitting explosion suddenly shattered the silence. The accompanying destroyers quickly commenced anti-submarine maneuvers to protect the *Iowa*...only to discover that one of the *Porter's* rear depth charges had fallen overboard and exploded.

The convoy continued on, and so did the *Porter's* mishaps. A freak wave washed over the ship and took with it everything on deck that wasn't nailed down, including one crew member who was never found. Then, one of the boilers went out..

On November 14, the *Iowa* and her destroyers were off the coast of Bermuda. The *Iowa* was demonstrating her air attack defenses. The big ship had let loose a number of weather balloons as targets, and her over 100 guns were blasting them out of the air. Over on the *Porter*, perhaps hoping to redeem his rapidly sinking career, Captain Walter had his crew go to battle stations and shoot down the few remaining balloons which were now drifting toward the ill-fated destroyer.

Then all Hell broke loose. Through a comedy of errors, the *Porter* fired a live torpedo at the *Iowa*! The *Iowa*, upon being notified by the *Porter's* radio operator, commenced evasive maneuvers. Moments later, a horrendous explosion erupted just behind the battleship. The *Iowa's* wash had detonated the torpedo just as it was passing the stern. The crisis was over.....well, not exactly.

On board the *Iowa* was President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Ernest King, and a myriad of other top brass, all of whom were on their way to the Big Three Conference in Tehran. Captain Walter and his entire crew were arrested and sent back to Bermuda for trial. It was the first time in U.S. Naval history that a complete ship's crew had been arrested.

In a closed-door inquiry back in Bermuda which lasted for several days, it was eventually concluded that the whole thing was just "an unfortunate set of circumstances," but someone had to be held accountable. Captain Walter and several of his crew found themselves in obscure shore assignments, and Torpedoman Lawton Dawson, directly responsible for the armed torpedo, was sentenced to 14 years at hard labor. President Roosevelt intervened, however, and Dawson was not jailed. The entire incident was then cloaked in secrecy.

And the *Porter*? It ended up on patrol duty in the Aleutians, the Navy apparently believing it could do any harm there.

...Not surprisingly, perhaps, there is no known cover from the *William D Porter*.