

U.S.S. Fuller Cover Recalls...

Nightmare at Honda Point

*September 8, 1923...*The 15 ships of the U.S. Navy's Destroyer Squadron 11 quietly powered their way through the tranquil sea off the California coast. Returning from the hectic activities of Fleet Week in San Francisco, the destroyers were heading back home to San Diego. The waters which Ferdinand Magellan had called the "Peaceful Sea" were quiet, the night was still, and the typical summer coastal fog was dense.

The grey flotilla followed a single file path, making good time (20 knots) despite the fog and the evening conditions. The USS Delphy led the way, navigating the route. Shortly before 9 PM, the squadron commander, Capt. Edward H. Watson, ordered the column to turn left, intending to take the ships between the mainland and the Channel Islands, but the Delphy had made a mistake in navigating its course and turned itself...and the entire southbound column...into the rugged shoreline rather than the Santa Barbara Channel 20 miles to the south.

The serenity of the night was suddenly ripped asunder by the wail of ships' sirens towards the front of the column, and one of the worst peace-time disasters for the U.S. Navy began to unfold....and there was nothing the sailors could now do to prevent it.

Moments after the sirens sounded, the USS Chauncey ran aground. Five other four-stackers—the S.P. Lee, Young, Fuller, Woodbury, and Nicholas—followed the leader to their doom. The Young hit the rocks and rolled over. Two other destroyers in the line ran aground, but were able to back themselves off. Waves dragged the Chauncey along the Young's upended propeller and sliced it open, but it remained upright. Survivors from the Young made their way to the Chauncey by means of a lifeline that was hauled over to the Chauncey by a heroic sailor from the Young.

Help came from ranchers and citizens from the nearby town of Lompoc. They helped crewmen who waded ashore or needed to be hoisted up the bluffs. Southern Pacific railroad's main West Coast line ran nearby, and special trains were sent to bring the injured to area hospitals and take the other survivors 240 miles south to San Diego.

When it was over, seven of the 15 ships, almost half of Destroyer Squadron 11, were wrecked on Honda Point, a rocky promontory on the Santa Barbara County coast. Some 23 sailors were dead; more than 800 had been rescued. The disaster left an indelible memory with the survivors and a stain on Capt. Watson's naval career. He survived a court-martial, but lost an expected promotion to admiral. He retired six years later.

Today, 91 years later, the tragedy is largely forgotten, and what the salvagers couldn't take is mostly covered by the sea, except at low tide.

In 1973, the Chauncey's anchor was recovered and made into a memorial at Vandenberg Air Force Base, 130 miles northwest of Los Angeles.

