

ISLANDER TELLS OF WAGING FOUR DAY BATTLE AGAINST TYPHOON IN CHINA SEA

Four days and nights of battling the fury of a terrific typhoon which hit the East China Sea September 15, 1945, during which time his ship, the U.S.S. Ocelot, collided with seven other ships and finally struck a reef, is described in a letter just received by the family of B. J. Cunningham, Jr., Y3/c,USNR.

Narrating his experience, Cunningham wrote:

“No doubt you would have read of the typhoon which hit the East China Sea. Unfortunately the U.S.S. Ocelot was caught. We had fair warning of the approaching typhoon and had time to prepare for it. The water changed color and we secured all the office fixtures to the bulkheads, hoisted all the boats aboard and lashed down all unstable gear. The sea was becoming very choppy. It got so rough I could not stay in my sack for fear of rolling out. The next morning we knew we were in for a rough time but we didn't dream how bad it would be.

“The peaceful bay with its sky blue water was now an ugly green. In the mess hall tables and benches were sliding across the deck, which made it difficult to eat. It was raining and the wind velocity was increasing. By chow time that evening, the wind was blowing a terrific gale, rain was coming down in torrents and we were all above deck with rain gear, life jackets, life belts on. The water was then so rough that we could not stand on the deck without holding onto something. All combatant ships had to be pulled out to sea as the bay was crowded with all types of ships, cargo, oiler, transports, tenders, auxiliaries, etc.

“NEVER PRAYED MORE EARNESTLY”

“The wind blew with such force that the Ocelot was unable to hold her anchors. We were drifting about, both of our 10-ton anchors dragging on the sea floor. Our first collision was with an LST. She hit us toward the stern on the port side, tearing a huge hole in our bulkheads, breaking the water pipes, and cutting off our water supply. That was the first collision, we didn't know it then, but seven were to follow.

“We lost our starboard anchor and 65 fathoms of chain, and could not stay anchored. Commissioned in 1909, the Ocelot was plated together with bolts, no welding or solid sides, no watertight compartments. But it was that and that only that saved us. From then on it seemed we hit nearly every ship in the harbor. Each collision crippled us a little more.

“An ammunition ship hit us head on and left a hole 20 feet long in the bow. The jolt threw us across the deck. It was getting very dark and the Admiral decided to head for open sea to get away from the other ships. We thought we were headed for sea, but instead we were going straight towards the reefs.

“We hit the reef head on. You could hear the rocks tearing the bottom right out of the Ocelot, her overtaxed engines gave out and we couldn’t move. We were ready to abandon ship but we didn’t have a chance in the sea, so we decided against it. On the reef, we were taking on water fast, the No. 2 holds being covered with 5 feet of water. Pumps were put to work and seemed to hold their own. I was scared and so was every man on board. I prayed and never more earnestly in my life.

CREW WORN OUT

“At midnight, to our starboard, we saw a large merchant ship approaching us, apparently out of control, flying two vertical red lights with her midships spotlight pointing skyward. She had lost her anchors and her motors had cut. She drifted right into us and hit us with a terrific smash.

“For 2 hours we laid there, banging back and forth, tearing each others sides out. We threw every loose article over the side between the ships trying to ease the crashing. Even our lifeboats and rafts. At last we secured the lines and that eliminated the pounding. The merchant ship was the U.S.S. Victor H Oulanhan. About three o’clock the next morning word was passed out that the Ocelot was sinking. All hands were called below to the engine room where the water was rising rapidly, more than the portable pumps could take care of. We started a bucket brigade. With buckets, we attempted to bail the water out from the four decks. The line started on the port side going down into the engine room and came out the starboard, a continuous cycle. Our fuel pumps had broken and oil was over everything. For six hours we bailed continuously, never stopping. We couldn’t lower the water but we did stop it from reaching the generators. By eight o’clock that night we were worn out, no water to drink, covered with oil and dead tired. Oil had gotten into our storerooms and all provisions were ruined.

NOT ONE MAN LOST

“The next morning the storm was beginning to break but the water was still very rough. We went back to bailing oil. My sleeping compartment was covered with two feet of oil. The generators had gone out, and at night the ship was dark, and only flashlights could be used. We had no food and our meals consisted of cold chili which was salvaged. The fourth day we prepared to leave the ship as she could not hold together much longer. We packed our gear, what I had left, the office files, and were taken off by LCTs to an APL which we are now on. We will be aboard it, until our flagship, the U.S.S. Holland arrives this week from Guam.

“Our crew is all together, not a man lost. Lots of ships were sunk, many more grounded. The Ocelot is still hanging together. Three tugs tried to pull her off the reef but with no success. She is too firmly settled and will probably go down with the merchant vessel. The only thing that saved her this long was the plated sides. That way, one or two plates could break and the whole side would not disintegrate.

“Last night we had a hot meal and a shower. We were all covered with oil and looked like a bunch of tramps. Feeling fine and oh so thankful to be here. We haven’t heard as yet of the damage done elsewhere, but sea bags, clothing, mattresses, etc. are floating about the surface of the water.”