

# *ODYSSEY OF THE 'WILLIE D'*



## *USS WILLIAM D. PORTER (DD-579)...One Jinxed Vessel!*

There is no mention in the scant information available about this World War II destroyer that anything unusual...perhaps like not being properly christened...was the cause of the multiple misfortunes that befell DD-579 during her lifespan. Named in honor of an obscure Civil War naval officer, the son of the more famous Commodore David Porter; this destroyer was nicknamed the 'Willie D' by her crew. She was one of numerous naval combatants built at Consolidated Steel's shipyard in Orange, Texas during the 1940's.

Like hundreds of other US Navy ships that were mass-produced and rushed into service during that world-wide conflict, her construction period was pretty brief by contemporary standards. Only fourteen months elapsed from keel laying until commissioning. From there it was all downhill...until the Willie D slipped beneath the surface of the Pacific Ocean off Okinawa...only twenty-two months following her delivery to the Navy.

During that short period of time, the WILLIAM D. PORTER amassed a lengthy and amazing record of woeful wrongdoings. Other ships of that era also had mishaps; in part due to the lack of sea-going expertise of the hastily-trained sailors that manned them. But DD-579's crew experienced far more than the average, and one incident topped all the rest...by far. It's hard to think of any way to relate this string of sad situations without starting off as all classic sea stories are supposed to begin: "*Now, this is no s - - !*"

Shortly after being commissioned, the Willie D and two other destroyers were assigned the task of guarding the brand-new battleship IOWA and an embarked entourage led by none other than President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The IOWA's mission was to transport the American president, high-ranking diplomats and multi-starred military men to an overseas' war planning conference with Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin.



But even before DD-579 left port, she damaged a nearby ship while backing down to maneuver out of the harbor. Her anchor raked across the other vessel's side, damaging railings, life rafts and other gear. With only a scraped anchor, the Willie D continued on her way. Just twenty-four hours later, she was steaming eastward, escorting the IOWA.

The IOWA's task force was under strict radio silence, due to the secrecy of their mission and their irreplaceable human cargo. While speeding through enemy-infested waters, suddenly, an explosion rocked and shocked the task force. Anti-submarine maneuvers were ordered, and then called off when the skipper of the Willie D reluctantly reported that an unsecured depth charge had fallen off his command's stern and caused the explosion. An accident that could not have happened if the device's triggering mechanism had been placed in the 'safe' position, per standard practice.

Then, soon afterwards, a freak wave washed across the hapless DD-579, carrying away everything not properly lashed down. One sailor was washed overboard and never found. And one of the ship's boilers malfunctioned and the destroyer lost power for a brief period of time.

Lt. Cmdr. Wilfred A. Walter, the commanding officer of the WILLIAM D. PORTER, had been considered as being on a fast track career when he placed DD-579 in commission. Reporting these multiple mishaps to the task force commander certainly wasn't doing anything positive for his future. But those incidents paled to insignificance when the next mistake occurred...



When dawn broke on November 14, 1943, the IOWA and her protective screen of destroyers were just east of Bermuda, steaming peacefully, but watchfully, in moderate seas. President Roosevelt had been a maritime enthusiast all his life and had served as the Assistant Secretary of the Navy during World War I. In good spirits and enjoying his voyage, the president wanted to see what his newest battleship could do. Admiral Ernest J. King, Chief of Naval Operations, who was also onboard the battleship, set up a demonstration.

IOWA launched some weather balloons and all four naval vessels commenced shooting them down. That exercise was followed by the destroyers steaming in line past the battleship and acting out the tactics for firing torpedoes for the President's pleasure.

Supposedly a simulated firing...

But one of the Willie D's torpedomen must have left one of her torpedo tubes primed for live firing. As DD-579 steamed smartly abeam of the IOWA at a range of 6,000 yards, the order to simulate firing was given. "Fire 1, Fire 2, Fire 3..." With a loud whoosh, a live torpedo was launched from the destroyer, aimed directly at the battleship!



To put it mildly, all hell broke loose. At first, the crew of the destroyer was in shocked denial. Then the reality of what they had done sunk in. A visual warning was sent...albeit an erroneous one that was either ignored or misunderstood. Frustrated and scared, the Willie D's captain ordered that radio silence be broken in order to alert the IOWA.

A terse and pretty uninformative message was sent: "*Lion* [code name for the IOWA], *come right.*" The battleship's radio operator was worried about why communications' restrictions had been violated, and asked for the offender's identity instead of immediately passing the message to the bridge. When a clearer message was sent, the IOWA's captain ordered an emergency increase in speed and a sharp turn in hopes of evading the torpedo. When FDR was told what was happening, he asked to be moved closer to the rail so he could see better! There is no record that request was honored...

As the IOWA took evasive action, her main battery was trained on the WILLIAM D. PORTER, in case she was involved in an assassination plot. The crew of the Willie D found that looking at the business end of nine, 16-inch naval weapons was a disturbing sight, indeed. When the torpedo exploded, it did so harmlessly, activated by the turbulent wake of the battleship. The crisis was over. So was Captain Walter's career.



An incensed and embarrassed Admiral King ordered Walter and his entire crew placed under arrest; the first time in the history of the Navy when an entire ship's company was arrested. The IOWA and the other two escorting destroyers resumed the interrupted voyage and completed their mission without further incident. Commander Charles M. Keyes was immediately placed in command of the WILLIAM D. PORTER, and proceeded to take her to Bermuda. Captain Walter's command career had lasted exactly three months and twenty days.

An inquiry was held to sort out what had gone wrong. To make matters worse, as if that were possible, the inquiry discovered that the torpedoman at fault had tried to conceal his mistake. His 'reward' was to be sentenced to fourteen years at hard labor. Walker, several of his officers and a few enlisted men were censured and banished to shore duty.

When President Roosevelt learned of the inquiry results, he intervened. He asked that no one be punished for what had been an accident. The Navy reluctantly acquiesced, but kept the incident secret for the remainder of the war.

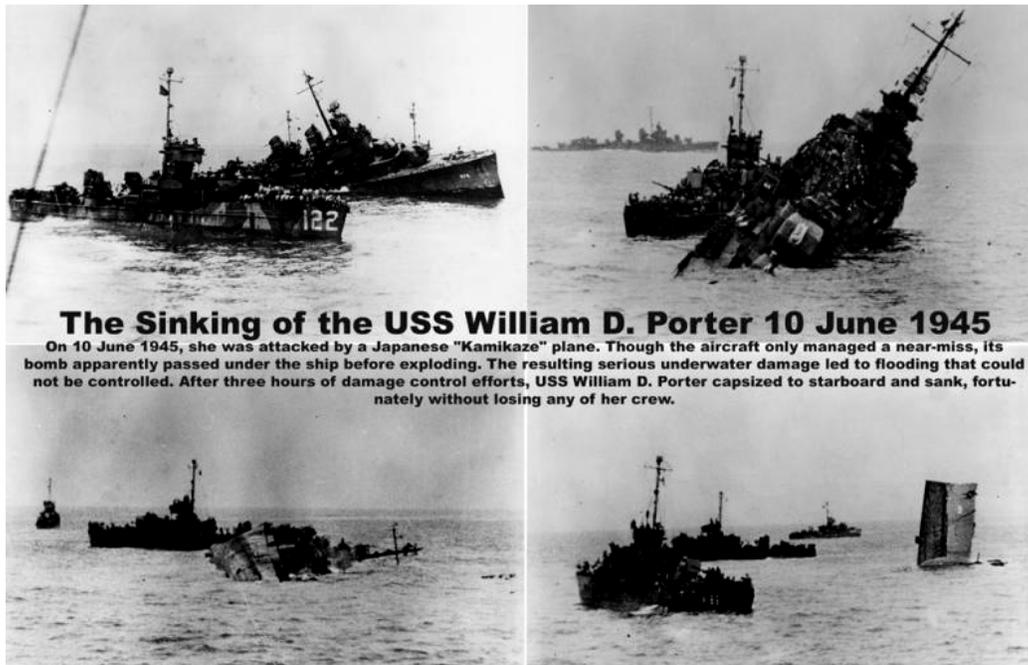
The Willie D, still under the command of Captain Keyes, was banished to the Aleutian Islands. This photo of her was taken off Attu Island in mid-1944. She remained in Alaskan waters for almost a year, before being reassigned to the Western Pacific.



In December of 1944, DD-579 participated in the allied invasion of the Philippines and actually shot at the enemy for a change; downing Japanese aircraft. In April of 1945, the WILLIAM D. PORTER was assigned to support the invasion of Okinawa. Here, her bad luck continued, when she managed to riddle the side of the USS LUCE (DD-522) with anti-aircraft fire intended for attacking Japanese aircraft that were skimming the waves.

As the conflict on and around Okinawa raged, Japanese kamikazes repeatedly attacked American forces afloat, inflicting severe damage and sinking a number of ships. On June 10, 1945, a kamikaze was headed towards a ship that was near the Willie D. At the last moment, probably crippled by American gunfire, the suicide plane veered away and crashed alongside DD-579. Her crew collectively breathed a sigh of relief.

But shortly after the Japanese plane disappeared, the bomb it was carrying exploded...and, not surprisingly, given her luck, under the keel of DD-579. Numerous seams in her hull plating were ruptured and uncontrolled flooding followed. Three hours later, after her crew had been evacuated safely to nearby vessels, the star-crossed Willie D sank by the stern in over 2,500 feet of water. Captain Keyes, who had assumed command less than nineteen months before she sank, was the last man off the ill-fated destroyer. He left the Willie D just seven minutes before she disappeared from view.



During that final act in her ill-fated career, DD-579 ironically redeemed herself with a rare bit of good luck. She was the only American vessel sunk in combat during World War II without suffering a single casualty.

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