Torn and aflame from stem to stern, the light carrier Princeton was doomed from the moment a bomb pierced her hangar deck. Her valiant crew refused to give up the ship until a deadly explosion nearly ripped her in two.

She was the fourth ship to bear the proud name Princeton, and though laid down as the Cleveland-class light cruiser Tullahoma (CL-61) in June 1941, she was quickly converted into a much-needed aircraft carrier under the War Emergency Plan and renamed Princeton following the attack on Pearl Harbor. By late February 1942, she had been commissioned at Philadelphia as one of nine new CVLs of the high-priority Independence-class. As a stopgap warship, she boasted the speed of a fleet carrier — fast and nimble — but operationally she would suffer from the same shortcomings that would affect the smaller escort carriers which would follow. Indeed, her class might not have existed at all were it not for the intervention of President Franklin D. Roosevelt into the Navy’s panicked build-up following Pearl Harbor. Long a student of all matters naval, and a former Assistant Secretary of the Navy himself, Roosevelt recalled design studies that had been made in the mid-1930s that focused on the suitability of using cruiser hulls for aircraft carriers. The Navy had long frowned on the concept arguing that these smaller vessels lacked the versatility and punch a large fleet carrier, like the then building new Essex-class, offered. Roosevelt countered that two small light carriers would equate to one single fleet carrier in overall effectiveness; that if they were aurally built they could be delivered far more quickly and would give the Fleet a much-needed back-up force. After much high-level wrangling, Roosevelt’s theory and considerable influence would win out. Hindsight after the war would prove the validity of the president’s notions about carrier design.

By mid-July, Princeton, now reclassified CVL-23, had completed her Caribbean shakedown cruise, taken aboard Air Group 23’s 27 fighters and 18 scout bombers, and was on route to Hawaii. As predicted, the short 555-foot long and narrow 73-foot wide, flight deck would pose problems in both launching and retrieving aircraft, for as the weight of new aircraft increased an ever longer takeoff run was required. Planes were forced to be crowded on deck with the result that any pilot who missed “a trap” (successful engagement of any of the

Dramatic painting by R.G. Smith depicting the end of Princeton following orders to destroy the floating hulk. Two torpedoes did the job.