

# The Terrible Fate of the USS JUNEAU

*In the fury of battle, no one realized the Juneau was missing, victim of a Japanese torpedo that sent the sleek near-new anti-aircraft cruiser to the bottom in a violent explosion. For the few survivors cast into the shark-infested sea, the worst was yet to come*

BY JOHN McDOWELL

**I** was caught in the ship's mast and as the ship went down I was dragged under the water tangled with the mast of the ship... finally I worked myself loose and tried swimming to the top but there was so much suction that I just gave up, I didn't have a chance to get a full breath of air anyway on account of the sudden explosion, so I just gave up swimming. All of a sudden, you know how it is when you start getting closer to the top of the water, how you start rising faster, there is not so much pressure, then I broke through the oil on the top and I was safe."

The man who narrated the above account in a 1943 naval interview

was Lester E. Zook and the experience he described took place shortly after his ship, the light cruiser USS *Juneau*, CL-52, was torpedoed and sunk near the Solomon Islands on 13 November 1942. Disintegrating in a violent explosion, *Juneau* vanished beneath the waves in less than a minute.

Of the cruiser's original crew of over 700 officers and men, only 100 to 140 were still alive, floating in a sea of oil. George "Sully" Sullivan, a Gunner's Mate from Waterloo, Iowa, was one of those men clinging to life amid the debris and fuel oil. George, as the oldest of the five Sullivan brothers serving on the *Juneau*, had always looked out for his younger brothers — now all four of them had

perished when the ship sank. Roll upon roll of toilet paper was floating around and George took some clean tissue from the core of some of these and went among the other survivors, wiping the fuel oil from their eyes in an attempt to identify his brothers; he also called out for them. Lester Zook would later write the mother of the five Sullivans that, "It was a sad and pathetic sight to see George looking for his brothers, but all to no avail." Two Rogers brothers and two brothers named Coombs also were lost on the *Juneau*.

Back on 7 December 1941, the Sullivan family had still been intact. Tom Sullivan, the father, was a freight conductor on the Illinois Central railroad, that line's tracks passing not far from their modest home at 98 Adams Street in Waterloo, Iowa. Alleta Sullivan, the mother, had married Tom back in 1914 and together they'd raised their Irish Catholic brood of five boys and one girl.

On that fateful Sunday afternoon in 1941, the Sullivans were listening to the radio when suddenly the news came on about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

"I remember I was crying a little," Mrs. Sullivan later recalled for a *Waterloo Courier* article. "Then George said, 'Well, I guess our minds are made up, aren't they fellows? And when we go in, we want to go in together. If the

worst comes to the worst, why we'll all have gone down together."

At that time all five brothers were working at Rath, the meat-packing plant, in Waterloo. Their ages ranged from 19, for Albert, to 27, for George, and the other three boys, Joseph, Madison, and Francis, were in between. Genevieve, the only daughter, was 25. Al, the "baby of the family," was the only one of the six who'd married and had an infant son, Jimmy. The two oldest boys, George and Francis, had just come back in June 1941 from a four-year hitch in the Navy, having served on an old tin can, the USS *Hovey* (DD-208).

After the Pearl Harbor attack, the Sullivans learned that Bill Ball of Fredricksburg, Iowa, had died when his ship, the battleship *Arizona*, was sunk during the battle. Bill was a friend who'd once saved George's life while they were swimming in Hawaii; avenging Bill's death was at least part of the reason the Sullivan brothers enlisted in the Navy.

Although it was against the Navy's wartime policy to send brothers to the same ship, the Sullivan boys were used to sticking together. They wrote a letter to Washington and succeeded in getting permission for all five of them to be stationed together. They enlisted on 3 January 1942 and went to boot camp at Great Lakes, Illinois.

USS *Juneau* ready for launching at the Federal Shipbuilding yard in Kearny, New Jersey, on 25 October 1941. America's entry into WWII was only weeks away.

Meanwhile, at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, a new \$13,000,000 light cruiser of the *Atlanta*-class was nearing completion, four-months ahead of schedule. Built at the Federal Shipyards in Kearny, New Jersey, the new ship, the USS *Juneau* (CL-52), was described as a "nail in Hitler's coffin" by R/Adm. Andrews on the day when she was launched, 25 October 1941. The skipper was to be Capt. Lyman "Knut" Swenson, of Provo, Utah, a man one *Juneau* crewman described as "...a good skipper... a kind person, but strict." Swenson had commanded the destroyer squadron that'd taken President Roosevelt to his historical meeting with Winston Churchill off the coast of Iceland in 1941.



Captain Lyman Swenson (left), *Juneau*'s commanding officer, receives congratulations from R/Adm. Adolphus Andrews, Commander, Third Naval District, at the light cruiser's commissioning ceremonies. Photographed at the New York Navy Yard on 14 February 1942. Captain Swenson was lost with his ship on 12 November 1942.

Dramatic rear view of the *Juneau* in New York Harbor on 11 February 1942 shortly after the light cruiser had been camouflaged.

