



THE ARISAN MARU TRAGEDY

By William Bowen

A draft of prisoners was assembled at Old Bilibid Prison, Manila, Philippines starting in late September 1944 for transport to Japan to work as forced labor. Many of the men came from the Cabanatuan Prison Camp. The draft of approximately 1,800 boarded the *Arisan Maru* and departed Manila on October 10, 1944. The ship sailed south to the vicinity of Palawan Island and laid over until 18 October. One reason advanced for the move South and the layover was to avoid US air and naval action.

The *Arisan* returned to Manila on the 19th, took on supplies on the 20th and left in a convoy around midnight headed for Takao, Formosa.

The 6886 ton *Arisan Maru* was sunk in the Bashi Straits, South China Sea, Latitude 20 o 46' N, Longitude 118 o 18' E, on October 24, 1944 at about 5:00 PM. Naval records indicate that the USS Shark II (SS 314) attacked a Japanese freighter in the late afternoon of October 24, 1944. The USS Shark was lost with all 87 hands in that same action and is believed to have torpedoed the *Arisan*. The *Arisan* carried no markings or flag indicating that it was carrying Allied prisoners. The Americans had no way of recognizing the *Arisan* as a prison ship. It was hit aft of midships causing the ship to split open with the rear section sinking downward into the sea. A torpedo is thought to have hit in number three hold where Japanese troops and civilians were located.

The Japanese quickly evacuated the ship and were picked up by their destroyer escorts. Before leaving the Japanese guards cut rope ladders into the prisoner holds but these were restored by the prisoners and the survivors agree that almost all prisoners were able to get off the ship. Many scavenged whatever food and water they could before leaving the ship. At first, many prisoners swam toward the Japanese destroyers hoping for rescue. They were pushed and beaten away with poles. The men climbed on whatever wreckage they could find to stay afloat for rescue.

There is sometimes a question regarding the number of survivors. The documented number is eight or nine depending on whether you include PFC Charles W. Hughes who succumbed to exposure and poor treatment shortly after being picked up and taken to Formosa. Five men miraculously sailed to China and were taken to Allied forces and returned to the USA in December 1944. The five were civilian Robert S. Overbeck, Sgt. Calvin R. Graef, Cpl. Donald E. Meyer, Pvt. Anton Cichy, and Pvt. Avery Wilber. Overbeck was the first to climb into an abandoned life-boat shortly after the destroyer left the area. Later in the evening Wilber was noticed and picked up followed a few hours later by Cichy. At dawn Graef and Meyer were spotted and they completed the five. A few other men were spotted floating at a distance but sea conditions did not allow them to get close enough to be picked up.

The story of the five is one of extraordinary good fortune and divine help from above. Overbeck found a box with a sail floating near the life-boat. Later, a keg of water was found and some hard tack ration was on board. Two days of sailing brought them near the China coast and a friendly Junk. The Junk Captain escorted the men to friendly Chinese and for the next 12 days the five survivors were transported about 600 miles by foot, truck, bicycle and plane to Kunming air field, base of the 14th Air Force and the Flying Tigers. On November 28, 1944 they started their flight aboard a C47 back to the USA. They flew over historic sites and terrain in India, Pakistan, Iran, Egypt and Africa. They were back in Washington, DC being debriefed on December 5, 1944.

Four men survived on rafts of wreckage, Sgt. Philip Brodsky and Cpl. Glenn Oliver together on one and WO Martin Binder and Pvt. Charles W. Hughes separately. These four were picked up 4-5 days after the sinking by Japanese ships and transported to Formosa. Upon arriving in Formosa Brodsky and Oliver were interrogated by the Kempeitai and later they were joined by Binder. The three were blindfolded, taken to the dock area and loaded on a Japanese freighter that turned out to be the Hell Ship Hokusen Maru. The three were held topside and forbidden to communicate with any other prisoners. After a few days Hughes was brought on board. The ship then sailed for Japan but after a few days returned to Formosa and the men unloaded. Pvt Hughes died 11/09/1944 in Shirakawa Japanese prison hospital on Formosa. The remaining three were moved to various camps on Formosa and on January 19, 1945 Glenn Oliver was put on a detail to Japan. His last day of work for the Japanese was August 15, 1945—Liberation at last. Brodsky and Binder remained on Formosa until Wars end. The accounts of the survivors are

available in the National Archives and in other interviews.



Who were these men of the Arisan whose lives would end in such an inauspicious manor. They were Chaplains and doctors, farm boys, poets and roustabouts, young soldiers and old, fathers, brothers and sons. They were the product of boom times and depression. They were put in harms way by a government and electorate with strong isolationist leanings. By a President who would put Europe first. A nation that stood by while millions of Chinese and others were slaughtered by a ruthless Japanese Army. A Japanese military that was collecting intelligence on every inch of the Philippines prior to Pearl Harbor with the full knowledge of the US Government. Let those who love peace not close their eyes to evil. Only the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor would arouse our nation to action but the loss of Naval control in the Pacific sealed the fate of the men in the Philippines. They would receive no outside help. They would fight along with their Filipino comrades until their supplies were exhausted.

Arisan Maru, Photo Courtesy of Yuhji Miwa
<http://www.aa.cyberhome.ne.jp/~museum/>
from *The Pacific War as Told by Merchant Ships*
Hisashi Noma, 2002

They became the victims of a war of political ideology and attitude not of their making. For nearly three years these men of the Hell Ships fought to near starvation, many enduring the "death march" and all experiencing the brutality of their captors. Many were from National Guard and Reserve units called up with little preparation and for the most part, supplied with antiquated equipment to defend the far off Philippines.

Picture now, after enduring all this cruelty, of feeling your life ebb away in the waters of the Pacific. Picture lines of men swimming to a Japanese destroyer only to be denied rescue, actually beaten away with clubs, as described by the eight survivors. Of having comrades leave the very raft that you were on to seal their fate. Of voices fading in the night as the sea slowly claimed the weakened men of the Arisan. In the morning the sun would rise over a choppy sea with some men still clinging to wreckage, praying for rescue. Their final days or hours known only to God. Remember too that these men spent two weeks in the filthy holds of the Arisan before it was sunk. My father spent his thirty-ninth birthday in the hold of this Hell Ship. I wonder how many others spent their last birthday in such filth.

I was six years old when we left my father on the pier in Manila as our ship to take us home left the dock. Not knowing but praying that he too would come home. For a number of years after the war I wondered if my father could still be alive on some remote island. Occasionally a story would surface of some soldier, usually Japanese, turning up in some remote island location. I am sure that many relatives held out this hope as I did for years. Sadly, we know from the survivors that many men were able to leave the ship and climb on wreckage never to be rescued. It was eight months after the sinking before the relatives were notified of the sinking and loss of their loved one. Consider also the anxiety of the relatives at the start of the war when their loved ones were classified as MIA for months before they learned if the relative was alive or dead.

Freedom has its costs for those who defend it on the front lines and those who support their loved ones from afar. I learned of a strange story a few years ago when contacted about a soldier on the Arisan. The story started in 1945 when a family was contacted about their relative that was listed on the Arisan Roster. They received a letter from a sailor who claimed to have found a dog tag on a beach in China that was that of their relative. In fact he sent the dog tag to the family. How did this dog tag get to China?

Wreath placed by Mr. Bowen for the Arisan Maru Plague



at the Nimitz Museum

Regardless of the final count, the *Arisan* still represents the greatest loss of American life in a single military sinking. Approximately 5000 American men died on hell ships in transit from the Philippines to Japan. The total is over 20,000 men lost when considering all Allied prisoners on Japanese hell ships traveling in the Pacific. If they were not killed by friendly fire in the fog of war by Allied planes and submarines they died in the filthy holds of the freighters carrying them to Japan for forced labor. Questions have been raised regarding when and what was known about these Hell Ships by American commanders, a question still being researched. We know that spies were active in Manila and it was no secret that prisoners were being shipped to Japan. The problem was to identify the ships in a vast sea. The ships carried no special markings and in fact the Japanese even switched numbers on the *Arisan* while it lay off Palawan. It is a matter of record that the group of five survivors of the *Arisan* was debriefed in mid November at the 14th Air Force in China and again on December 5th in Washington. Could not have this intelligence been used in hopes of avoiding the later tragedies of the *Oryoku*, *Enoura* and *Brazil* Hell Ship sinkings that occurred after December 13, 1944?

The primary purpose for posting the story and roster of the *Arisan* is to honor the men in this little known tragedy and to provide information to relatives and friends. The inscription on the Pacific War Memorial on Corregidor provides the best final benediction for the men of the *Arisan*:

"Sleep, my sons, your duty done, for Freedom's light has come;
sleep in the silent depths of the sea, or in your bed of hallowed sod,
until you hear at dawn the low, clear reveille of God."

Arisan Maru roster

* Mr. Bowen passed away on June 3, 2012.