

West Loch Disaster – May 21, 1944 65th Anniversary Commemoration

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On a quiet Sunday afternoon in May of 1944, a vast armada of warships filled Pearl Harbor in preparation for the invasion of Saipan named *Operation Forager*. With the seizure of bases in Marianas islands, American B-29s would be able to reach Japan only 1,500 miles away.

The invasion force included twenty-nine amphibious landing ships called LSTs. These vessels landed troops and supplies on the beaches to directly engage the enemy. On board LST 353, Army personnel of the 29th Chemical Decontamination Company busily unloaded mortars.

Suddenly from her deck, at approximately 1508, an explosion rocked the calm waters of the harbor, scattering hot shrapnel and other debris throughout the landing fleet. A mix of panic and confusion ensued. Urgent efforts to extinguish fires and to remove other LSTs out of harm's way were initiated. Two more increasingly violent explosions erupted at 1511 and 1522 respectively; the last one said to have been heard more than fifteen miles away. Vessels all around the harbor rushed to the scene to help battle the fires and rescue crewmen from the water.

“I was on the docks playing craps with the guys...we heard the first two explosions but they were far away and so we didn't think much of it. With the third explosion, I knew something was going on,” says Roy Sannella of Port Charlotte, Fl., a young sailor assigned to the tugboat YT-129 in Pearl Harbor. Roy and his shipmates boarded YT-129 and were ordered out to West Loch to help contain the fires that were by now threatening to rage out of control. “As we approached the site we saw bodies in the water. I told the skipper but he said that we would have to keep going forward to help in the fight. When we got there we were able to cut some of the LSTs loose, but eventually we had to back away

because of the inferno. When we went back in we rescued several survivors from the burning waters.”

By the next day, a total of 163 men lost their lives in the disaster and 396 men were wounded. Of the 34 LSTs in the area 6 had been lost completely and several more suffered extensive damage. Amazingly, replacements in men and material were quickly rounded up and the invasion of Saipan took place as planned on June 15, 1944.

Following the disaster, Admiral Nimitz wrote of the circumstances leading up to the mishap was a “calculated risk” made necessary by the high tempo of wartime operations and that “positive corrective action” was ensured so that it would not happen again. The times have changed, and the valuable lessons learned from the incident in West Loch have been put to practical use.

“In 1944, the Navy did not have a clear definition of how munitions should best be loaded,” comments Captain Debra A. Bodenstedt the current Commanding Officer of the Navy Munitions Command East Asia Division. “Work on the piers and other Navy facilities was done by the men of the ordnance battalions who had received very little training in cargo handling, let alone work with high explosives. Today’s ordnance workers are all trained and certified to handle ordnance and are required to re-certify each year.” Furthermore she adds, “The open fields surrounding the Naval Magazine represent the Explosive Safety Quantity Distance or ESQD which safeguard personnel and the inhabitants of nearby communities from possible fires or explosions.”

It is noteworthy that the Navy has not had another explosion of the magnitude of West Loch since the conclusion of World War Two. All that remains of the West Loch disaster is the rusted hulk of LST 480, jutting silently off the Waipio Peninsula.

For men like Roy Sannella, memories of the West Loch disaster are a bittersweet experience. “I’ve been doing my best to talk to school kids and other organizations about what happened and the sacrifices made.” Although he laments, “Not enough people know. That’s a shame.” Roy and fellow West Loch survivors Harry Horn, Alex Bernal and Wood Beeghly will be visiting Pearl Harbor on Thursday May 21 to commemorate the 65th anniversary of the event during a small ceremony at 0800 at the Naval Munitions Command East Asia Division directly across from the wreck of LST 480.

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