

The following is an excerpt from Jeff Noonan's memoir, *The Long Escape*.

## Typhoon!

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A few days after leaving Yokosuka, we were again slowly steaming back and forth between Formosa and mainland China. It was monotonous duty until one afternoon when we noticed that the sky had turned dark and ominous.

The Officer of the deck passed the word on the ship's speaker system that we should "Batten down all hatches and secure all loose equipment." There was some very bad weather on the horizon. We had seen storms before, of course, and we knew what to do. Each of us had certain areas to go to and make sure that everything loose was either put away or tied securely to something solid. We lowered all the hatches and made sure that all the doors were tightly closed. Then we went about our normal business, comfortable in the knowledge that we were living in an invincible environment.

I had the watch in the sonar shack that night from 4:00 p.m. until 8:00 p.m. Since the old sonar was useless in a storm like this, I spent a good part of the time on the bridge watching the storm come in. It was a typhoon and it seemed huge to my inexperienced eyes. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed continuously. The wind was pushing the rain so hard that it moved horizontally, driving at a speed that made it hurt when it hit your skin.

Soon the waves were far higher than the ship as we drove into and over them. From the bridge, it was awesome to see the huge waves ahead of us and the ship's bow raising, raising, and then raising some more, to finally go over the waves and dive into the liquid valleys behind them. Often the ship didn't recover fast enough and we drove straight into the next wave's body. When that happened, green water from the wave broke over the top of the bridge and we found ourselves looking into a maelstrom through the bridge windows. I was amazed every time that the windows held and the ship surfaced again.

The ship was almost 400 feet long, but at times, it seemed as if it were standing on end as it ran down the far side of these immense waves. Then it would surface and ride the crest of the next huge wave like some sort of massive surfboard before the wave would come crashing over us. Words can't describe the awe that sights like this inspire. It makes one realize that man is really a puny creature in the physical world. In this storm, even a huge steel beast like *Cogswell* seemed tiny and helpless.

But the ship drove on through the gloom as if it couldn't be bothered by Mother Nature—as if it were impervious to all of this.

We were about halfway through our routine north to south cruise between China and Formosa. As I stood behind the bridge, I overheard the Captain tell the OOD to head directly south so we could get out of the straits between the two land masses as rapidly as possible. Out in the open sea, it would be easier for the ship to handle the storm, he said.

I got off watch and, very carefully, made my way back to my berthing compartment. This was a delicate process, because there was no way to go from the bridge to the after living compartments, except going topside. So I carefully went aft, holding onto lifelines and any available solid objects as if my life depended on them, while water drenched me through and through. I was a happy young sailor when I finally was able to get inside the ship.

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After I arrived in our living compartment, we sat around for a while gabbing; then at 10:00 p.m., as usual, the lights went out and we went to sleep. I was in a top bunk and, like most of us; I had tied myself off loosely to one of the stanchions that the bunks were mounted to so that I wouldn't fall out if the ship took a bad roll. It rolled plenty and I was very happy that I was tied in. But finally I fell asleep.

Then all hell broke loose.

I found out later that the ship had hit a large wave and the bridge had lost control of the rudder. With the rudder loose, the ship had turned broadside to one of those huge waves and had literally rolled over onto its port side!

I woke with the breath knocked out of me, having been thrown into the stanchion beside me. I was hanging there with the stanchion across my middle and the bunk on my right, staring down at the stack of bunks that had been across the passage to the left of me.

Slowly—oh so slowly—the ship righted itself, then it slammed over the other way and I was hanging from the strap that I had tied myself with. Then again, the ship stabilized before slamming us in the other direction. This continued, slamming us back and forth, for what seemed hours, but must have been just minutes. The din was deafening. All kinds of alarms were going off. Sailors were yelling. The ship's speaker came on, warning us to stay below decks and keep all doors and hatches closed.

Somehow I got out of my bunk and down to the deck. I saw Bob trying to get the lights on, but there was no power, just the emergency red lights. For the first time in my life, I wondered, *Am I going to die here?*

Then slowly, very slowly, a kind of calmness came over us. The ship had righted itself and after a few more heavy, slamming, rolls, it seemed to have stabilized. (I found out afterward that the Bos'n on Watch in the after-steering, immediately above the rudder, had taken control of the rudder and was steering us on a course that was being directed over headphones from the bridge.)

We milled around, all a bit confused, and no one knowing quite what to do, or expect, next.

Then the bridge passed the word over the speakers for "All hands muster in your living quarters. Division Leading Petty Officers, report any missing people to the bridge immediately!"

We did that and soon were able to report that "Fox Division is all present and accounted for, Sir," to the bridge.

But we were the lucky ones. Soon we heard the awful announcement, "Man overboard! Man overboard!" That was followed by a long pause, then: "Leading petty officers, if you have people who can get topside safely, send them to assigned stations with binoculars, battle lanterns, and sound-powered phones. Make sure they can tie themselves to the superstructure. We think that there are at least three men in the water and we're searching for them. When people are on station, report to the Bos'n of the Watch on the phones. Be very careful."

We made plans rapidly. I got my gear and, dressed as if for a Montana blizzard went up to my director and lashed myself to it before I reported in to the bos'n. Rick was adjacent me, lashing himself to his director. I could see Bob, a bit aft of me and one deck lower, tied to his torpedo tubes. He was already scanning the water with his light and binoculars moving synchronously across the blackness. I followed suit and we could see several others doing the same. This went on for hours.

The seas didn't lessen. Tied to our equipment, we were regularly inundated by the ocean as the ship drove through the storm. I had to move the rope that tied me off several times, because

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it was bruising my ribs and tearing at my skin. Bob, being lower, had it even worse than me. But we all stayed on station, searching the water for our shipmates.

Before it became light, we heard an announcement that one of the missing people had been found aboard ship and was safe. He had been in a secluded supply material bin and had been knocked unconscious by flying material, but he was going to be fine.

Then, in what I firmly believed was a miracle, just after first light we spotted another person still swimming on the side of a huge wave. We all aimed the light from our Battle Lanterns at him and the Captain carefully maneuvered the ship as close as possible. This went on for what seemed like hours while the man desperately swam, just managing to stay afloat, but not making headway against the waves.

The deck force tried to get a boat into the water to go out after him, but before they could get it launched, the Captain got close enough, and one of the gunner's mates was able to shoot a line close enough that the man in the water was able to grab it. The deck crew began carefully pulling him toward the ship as the rest of us played our lights over him and the fierce water between us. Somehow, we got that guy aboard, to huge cheers from everyone watching.

That left one missing man. We never found him.

Sometime after dawn, the seas seemed to subside as the typhoon moved off. The clouds broke and eventually, the sun came through. With the light came the realization that our ship was badly damaged. From where I was, I could look down the port side and see bent and broken grey steel everywhere. Some of the lifeboat racks and one of the ship's small boats were missing. One of the three-inch gun mounts was dislodged from its foundation and was tilted wildly to the side, being held in place by electrical cables. Bulkheads were bent as if they had been punched in by a giant hand. The ship was moving through the water, but it was obviously not in any condition to do much.

Still we kept steaming in circles, steering from the after-steering station, looking for the lost sailor.

Eventually, other ships, including an aircraft carrier with search planes, came to our assistance and took over the search. We had seen no sign of the sailor. He was someone that I had not known well. He had been working in the ship's laundry, apparently with the door open to dissipate the laundry's heat, when the ship rolled over. The laundry was on the port side, and the water must have filled the space immediately, sucking him out with it when the ship righted. I sincerely believe that he could not have survived that hell, that tremendous force of water in that small space, for more than a few seconds—at least that is what I have always hoped. We never found any sign of him, nor did any of the other ships that searched for him over the next weeks.

The ship was badly crippled. We had no choice but to proceed very slowly to a shipyard. So we made our way to Sasebo, Japan, steering from after-steering and steaming very slowly. When we finally reached Sasebo, it was a relieved and very humbled crew that tied that ship to the pier. Somehow we were not the same people that had just left Japan a couple of weeks before. Death and near-death have a way of chastening even the most incorrigible among us.

This inport period was like no other that I have seen, either before or after. We were all working almost around the clock, trying to repair what we could. We on the fire-control crew had a major job before us: the storm had caused major misalignments of all elements of the

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ship's defense systems, from radars to directors to gun mounts to torpedo tubes, and it was our job to realign everything. This was a huge undertaking that had to be accomplished at night when the ship was cool and still. It was slow and painstaking work, done in a complicated process that not many sailors understood fully. Chief Evans took it on himself to work with me on this since I had no experience or training in it.

Liberty was non-existent for our crew during that inport period. My time was spent working, sleeping, and eating in a never-ending cycle. My director had a circular metal shield around it that had been badly bent in the storm. The shipyard cut the bent metal away and replaced it. After that, it was my job to get it cleaned, sanded, and painted. There were also some minor problems with my radar, caused by the physical shock of the storm. Luckily, the water had not reached any of the electronics, so I spent the days fixing the damage and the nights working with the Chief on the battery alignment.

But we got it all done. Like humans have done since time began, the men of the *Cogswell* rose to the emergency and did the job. We had a day of rest on Thanksgiving that year, but we were all so exhausted that we just ate turkey and slept.

By the middle of December, the ship was again ready for sea. We left Sasebo and steamed north to Yokosuka, where we were to have more repair work done and take on supplies. We would be inport over the Christmas and New Year Holidays for some much-needed rest and relaxation.