

WARRINGTON VS. THE HURRICANE

Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King allegedly stated: "...in today's navy no ship should ever be lost due to weather conditions." Yet the fact remained that the destroyer USS Warrington, along with four other naval vessels, had sunk with a loss of 390 officers and men in the worst Atlantic hurricane in nearly a decade. How had such a tragedy happened? Who had blundered? The Navy was damned if it knew!

BY OWEN GAULT

Newsman Walter Winchell needed a scoop. Harboring a grudge against the US Navy since it had refused him advance notice of the D-Day Normandy landings three-months earlier, Winchell vowed revenge. As America's most-influential and outspoken radio commentator, Winchell never



Chief of the Bureau of Yards and Docks. On 28 February 1844, he temporarily took over the duties of Secretary of Navy after Thomas Gilmer was killed when the cannon *Peacemaker* exploded during a firing demonstration on board USS *Princeton* at Washington. In 1846, he became Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance and held that position until he died on 12 October 1851. (Painting by Rembrandt Peale)

USS *Warrington* (DD-383) underway off Panama on 23 April 1943. The *Somers*-class destroyer was commissioned on 9 February 1938. (NHHC)



Always angling for a "scoop" — no matter how true — Walter Winchell inaccurately broadcast that USS *Warrington* had been lost with all hands.

allowed a matter of national security to stand in the way of a good story.

When word of the sinking of the destroyer USS *Warrington* (DD-393) in a hurricane off of the Florida coast reached him, the reporter knew he had a major scoop. Winchell couldn't wait to embarrass the Navy. After all, hadn't Adm. Ernest J. King, CIC of the US Fleet, only recently allegedly

stated, "No modern man-of-war should ever be lost to weather." That evening in mid-September 1944, Winchell began his nationwide radio broadcast with his usual bombastic greeting: "Good evening Mr. and Mrs. America,

and all the ships at sea — I have scooped the Navy! I'm sorry to report that the destroyer USS *Warrington* has been sunk with all hands 400-miles off Vero Beach, Florida!" From the pitched excitement in Winchell's voice a listener might have thought the *Warrington* belonged to the Imperial Japanese Navy.



USS *Warrington* in port while performing escort duty for President Franklin D. Roosevelt's cruise aboard USS *Houston* (CA-30) during 18 February/3 March 1939. (NHHC)

WORST ATLANTIC HURRICANE IN A DECADE

Thankfully, Winchell was in error with his premature report that *Warrington* had gone down with all hands. Tragic as it was, actually, five officers and 68 of her crew of 321 were saved by the USS *Hyades* (AF-28), which *Warrington* was ostensibly escorting, and the destroyer-escort *Huse* (DE-145).

To a shocked nationwide audience,

Winchell's irresponsible broadcast was more than a breach of every law of decency and journalism. It was calloused cruelty, for he well knew that news of the destroyer's

sinking had not as yet been revealed to the family members of *Warrington's* crew. Indeed, in the wake of the worst hurricane to ravage the East Coast since 1938, the Navy was still in the process of calculating the storm's terrible toll. In terms of lives lost, more than 420 were missing or dead, hundreds of others seriously injured ashore and at sea. Property damage alone exceeded \$180 million. By best count, the Navy determined five vessels had been sunk; 16 others damaged, four seriously. Subsequent to Winchell's broadcast, the Fifth Naval District announced that in addition to the *Warrington*, the minesweeper *YMS-409*, Coast Guard cutters *Jackson* (WPC-142) and *Bedloe* (WPC-128), plus the light-ship *Vineyard Sound* had gone down.

There were few survivors. The next morning — Monday, 18 September 1944 — the *Miami Herald* blared surprise news with the headline: COAST GUARD CREW SURVIVES HURRICANE AT SEA. Remarkably, the Coast

Guard-manned US Army freighter *FS-315* had survived the storm even though she — like the ill-fated *Warrington* — had been battered into a helplessly disabled hulk by the 150-knot wind-whipped seas.

RIDING OUT THE STORM THAT SANK FIVE OTHERS

The wearied four officers and 21 seamen of *FS-315* were thankful to be alive as their crippled vessel was towed into Miami. Most were near exhaustion from their five day ordeal; the freighter more than once having come close to capsizing. A floating shambles, the new ship's rigging and most of her paint had been stripped away in the ferocity of the hurricane, leaving her steel hull naked and rust streaked.

Despite the odds, the plucky Coastguardsmen had managed to keep their heavily loaded small freighter afloat whereas the modern 1850-ton destroyer *Warrington* was unable to survive the same ordeal. Why, when both vessels were mechanically disabled by raging seas had one survived, the other perished? What had gone wrong? Were there lessons to be learned? Was it a matter of courage, or cowardice; errors in seamanship, or pure happenstance?

