

“WHEN THE SKY RAINED FIRE”

Pearl Harbor's West Loch Disaster of 21 May 1944

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Pearl Harbor contains three subareas, or “lochs,” named East, Middle, and West. On 7 December 1941, the East and Middle Lochs exploded in flames during the Japanese attacks. West Loch, spared from destruction at the hands of the enemy, fell victim some 3.5 years later to a spectacular and devastating ordnance accident.

Since the US entry into WWII, West Loch had harbored, in addition to Navy and civilian vessels, large stores of ammunition, fuel, and other material. On 21 May 1944, the various berths were housing 29 LSTs (Tank, Landing Ship), each as long as a football field. Preparations were almost complete for the journey to Saipan, the invasion of which was scheduled for 15 June. “To say that the LSTs were combat-loaded,” writes historian Howard E. Shuman, “is a euphemism.” Rather, “They were floating ammunition

dumps, floating gasoline storage tanks, floating vehicle garages, floating ship repair yards, and floating overcrowded hotels.”

At berthing station T-8 on the afternoon of 21 May, one of these ships — *LST-353* — appeared spontaneously to combust. “There was a terrific explosion,” according to Paul E. Cooper, a Marine onboard a neighboring LST.

From the deck of *LST-353*, shrapnel shot out in all directions, and burning debris fell from the sky. Blast forces flung men off their feet and into the sea. High-octane gasoline spilled into the water and ignited. Fires broke out on neighboring LSTs.

“I thought my head had blown off,” recalled William L.C. Johnson, a pharmacist's mate on the tank deck of nearby *LST-69*.

At the next berthing area over, T-9, LSTs began to depart the area. Some tried to get to a far corner of the loch, while others set course for open sea. Amid the confusion, none had made it very far when the second, larger explosion came — just three minutes after the first.

Cooper had been ordered to keep the Marines on his LST below decks to protect them from falling debris, but, when the second explosion hit, “all these men I was trying to keep [inside] came running through the door at the same time. I got knocked down as they went over the side into the water.”

Meanwhile, Johnson, having departed his LST in a small landing craft, was busy trying to pull men out of the water. But with the second explosion, which “threw equipment, men, and shrapnel all over the harbor,” Johnson



LST afire in Pearl Harbor a day after the 21 May 1944 explosions. Men are visible on her bow ramp, probably removing cargo. Other vessels are alongside and nearby, engaged in firefighting.