

MEMPHIS VS. THE TIDAL WAVE

THIS ARMORED CRUISER COULD NOT STAND UP TO THE PUNISHMENT OF MOTHER NATURE
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From the moment a ship is launched, the ocean is trying to sink it. Only the skill of the ship's crew and the reliability of her machinery can prevent this event from happening. On 29 August 1916, the ocean suddenly overwhelmed the crew and technology of the US Navy armored cruiser USS *Memphis* (ACR-10) anchored off Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, driving her onto rocks a half-mile from her anchorage, with the loss of 43 crewmen killed and another 204 seriously injured. Three of her crewmen were awarded Medals of Honor for their courage during the disaster. Although not sunk, the *Memphis* was a total loss and was eventually scrapped in place, making her the largest active US Navy surface combatant

ever lost as a result of "natural causes." The loss of the *Memphis* was a traumatic event for the US Navy in 1916. Although outdated in terms of her operational design (three similar Royal Navy armored cruisers had been lost at the Battle of Jutland 31 May/1 June 1916 with great loss of life, in addition to the three larger battle cruisers lost in catastrophic fashion at Jutland) the *Memphis* was nevertheless considered a large modern steel and steam warship, having been commissioned only in 1906, originally as the USS *Tennessee*. Her name was changed to *Memphis* on 25

May 1916, an action the superstitious considered bad luck. *Memphis* was 14,500 tons, 504 feet long, with a main battery of two twin 10-inch gun turrets and a secondary battery of 16 6-inch guns.

The court of inquiry and subsequent court martial of the skipper of the *Memphis*, Capt. Edward L. Beach Sr., struggled to achieve consensus on the cause of the loss, ultimately attributing it to a combination of hurricane, seismic wave, and tsunami. Captain Beach was found guilty of not having enough steam raised to get underway in short

USS *Memphis* (Armored Cruiser #10) wrecked at Santo Domingo where she was thrown ashore by tidal waves on the afternoon of 29 August 1916. This photo was taken in the late afternoon, immediately after she struck. Note the waves breaking over the ship. Men are visible on her bridge and midships superstructure. The photo appears to have received a great deal of retouching.

