

THE LOSS OF THE USS *ERIE*

The USS *Erie* was a gunboat that was torpedoed by a U-boat during the Battle of the Caribbean in November 1942, built with money from Roosevelt's New Deal, designed for her role in the Canal Zone as, in part, a floating diplomatic mission, she became a total loss, and her hulk now lies off Curacao.



USS Erie in 1938

The USS *Erie* (PG-50) was one of two vessels built under the following the 1922

Washington and 1930 London Naval Treaties as “slow gunboats”. The 1930 Treaty allowing for the construction of an unlimited number of such vessels, classified as “sloops”.¹

A “sloop” or “slow gunboat” could not exceed 2,000 tons standard displacement and could not mount a gun larger than 6.1 inch (155 mm), or have more than four guns above 3.1-inch (76mm). It could not be able to launch torpedoes or have a speed above 20 knots (23 mph, 37 kmh). The admiral who headed to US delegation at the 1930 conference² had argued in favour of such ships, particularly arguing for having a slightly faster maximum speed (the original speed was proposed at 18 knots – 20

¹ Originally a small square-rigged sail warship, it was used to describe a small anti-submarine warship used for convoy escort during World War 2.

² Admiral William V Pratt. He was the senior US Navy advisor and head of the US delegation to the London Naval Conference 1930. As Chief of Naval Operations 1930-33, he had supported the Treaty on the basis that the Navy would be built to treaty strength, but this plan was confronted by the economic problems of the Depression of the 1930s. He retired in 1933, but was recalled to active duty in 1941 to help expedite the development of escort carriers to counter the U-boat threat.

<https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/people/chiefs-of-naval-operations/admiral-william-v-pratt.html>

mph,32 kmh). It appears that he viewed such vessels as a means for the US (and Britain) to offset limitations in the numbers of cruisers and destroyers.

While described as a gunboat, most other US Navy patrol gunboats of the day were the “China” type, such as those which could be used on the rivers of China. These were much smaller, and much less heavily armed. Examples were those of the US Navy Yangtze River Patrol Force which were active on the river and Chinese coastal waters.³ Unlike those gunboats, the *Erie* had the appearance of a proper, if small, warship.

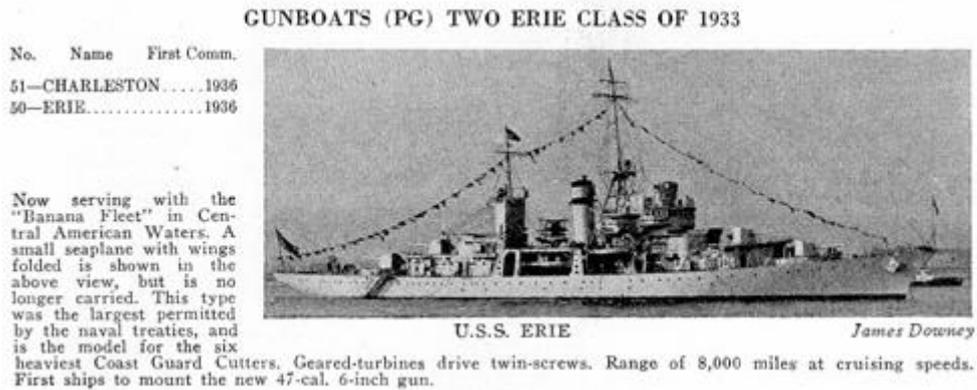
Under the Washington and London Naval Treaties, there was no limit how many small patrol-type combatants (such as gunboats, coast guard cutters, sloops, armed yachts, etc) each navy could have so long as the ships were generally built for littoral (i.e., coastal), convoy escort operations etc, and not general fleet use. For the US Navy, a ship such as the *Erie* provided a vessel that it could use to patrol the Canal Zone, freeing up larger and more capable warships for other missions.

The Washington Naval Treaty 1922 was an attempt to forestall an arms race such as that which was seen as a spur for the Great War by limiting naval construction. The British Empire, US, France, Italy and Japan were the parties, and they mostly concentrated on capital ships.

In 1930, the London Naval Treaty (aka the Treaty for the Limitation and Reduction of Naval Armament) followed, intended to address issues omitted from the earlier treaty – including submarines, cruisers and destroyers. It was Article 8 of this second treaty which described smaller surface combatants such as the *Erie*. The specifications were designed around the *Bougainville* Class sloops built for the French Navy in the 1930s.

³ The Patrol was established as a separate force in 1922, was suspended in 1942, revived in 1945, but permanently ended in 1949 following the Chinese Communist forces occupied the river valley. In 1937, one of these patrolling gunboats, the USS *Panay*, was “accidentally” attacked by Japanese aircraft near Nanking and sunk. For comparison to the *Erie*, the *Panay* was just 474 tons, and was armed with two 3-inch guns and several machine guns. For much more on US use of gunboats, see *Armed and Alone: America’s Century-Long Romance with Gunboats*:
<https://www.usserie.org/page4/assets/Sea%20Classics%202.pdf>
And <https://www.usserie.org/page4/assets/Sea%20Classics%201.pdf>

An interesting aside concerning the ship is that it was built using funding from the Roosevelt administration's Public Works Administration (PWA), being one of two ships authorised under the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 (NIRA) and built by the New York Navy Yard.⁴ Part of the "New Deal" designed to help the US recover from the Great Depression, NIRA gave the President the authority to build ships and an agency, the PWA, to pay for them.⁵



Extract from "The Ships and Aircraft of the US Fleet" (Herald-Nathan Press, 1939)⁶

THE SHIP

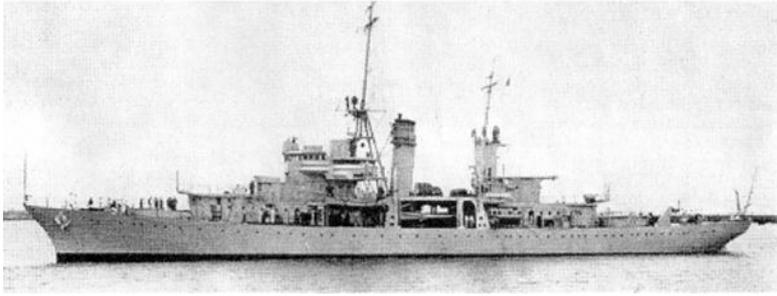
USS Erie, (given flag number PG 50, denoting it being classified as a "patrol gunboat")⁷ was laid down on 17 December 1934 at New York Naval Yard (aka Brooklyn Navy Yard) while her sister ship, *USS Charleston (PG 51)*, was laid down about the same time, at the Charleston Navy Yard. They had two Parsons geared turbines coupled to a pair of Babcock and Wilcox boilers, and were 327 feet (100 metres) long with a 41 feet (12.5 metres) beam.

⁴ The other was the light cruiser, *USS Brooklyn*, ordered in 1933, laid down in 1935, and commissioned in 1937. Two other warships, similarly funded, were built at other New York yards. <https://livingnewdeal.org/sites/brooklyn-navy-yard-uss-erie-brooklyn-ny/>

⁵ Created in 1933, and due to expire in June 1935, Congress extended it for another two years, as part of an overall multibillion program. Though the Supreme Court ruled in 1937 that part of NIRA was unconstitutional, the PWA survived to 1943. Other important ships were among its projects, including the aircraft carriers *USS Enterprise* and *Yorktown*.

⁶ <https://www.usserie.org>

⁷ There were sometimes seen as "mini cruisers" in their role in the Canal and Caribbean, given their relative size, large-calibre guns etc: <https://www.usserie.org/page4/assets/Sea%20Classics%202.pdf>



USS Erie before her 6-inch guns and other armament fitted, showing off her yacht-like hull design

They were armed with four 6-inch (150 mm) guns in open shield

single mountings fore and aft. They also had four quad 1.1-inch (2.8 cm) anti-aircraft guns, and later four 20 mm anti-aircraft Oerlikon cannon, and 30 depth charges. They had a maximum speed of 20 knots, and a maximum range of 8,000 nautical miles (9,206 miles, 14,815 km) at 12 knots (13 mph, 21 kmh).

The ships could also accommodate 44 US Marines and would carry a Chance Vought OS2U Kingfisher observation seaplane (although initially she carried a Curtiss SOC Seagull biplane).⁸ They had a nominal complement of 180 officers, men and marines (though normally carried fewer during peacetime operations). At the time of her loss, the *Erie* was said to be carrying a crew of 204 officers and men.

They also boasted a comparatively large superstructure, with a captain's suite, admiral's suite and a two-stateroom set of guest quarters. All this emphasised their quasi-diplomatic role, as did a large, uncluttered deck space that could be covered with canvas awning.⁹ It was said of them –

"They were ships unique unto themselves; too large for the usually defined tasks of a gunboat and too lightly armed to be effective warships. Intended for the tropics, they better resembled a millionaire's yacht; the choicest duty for peacetime black shoe sailors. They were built to display the American flag in Central America; to be naval diplomats...[and]... There was plenty spit and polish on the ERIE, what with all of those visiting dignitaries".¹⁰

⁸ There seems a little confusion over what type of Kingfisher was carried. Usually, sources use the US Navy designation "OS2U", which denotes an example built by the company whose design it was – Chance Vought (later Vought-Sikorsky), but at least once source referred to an "OS2N", which would make it a version licence-built by the Navy's own Naval Aircraft Factory. It may be both types were carried at different times.

⁹ <https://www.usserie.org/page4/assets/Sea%20Classics%202.pdf>

¹⁰ Ibid.

USS *Erie* was launched on 29 January 1936, and commissioned on 1 July 1936 (though then still lacking her 6-inch guns), with USS *Charleston* commissioned a week later. Finally, fully completed on 15 August, she went to sea for the first time on 17 August.¹¹

EARLY CAREER

After fitting out and undergoing testing, at the end of October 1936 she was ready for her shakedown cruise. This was to be a rough crossing of the North Atlantic,¹² to visit Plymouth in England. She then moved on sailed to Antwerp, Le Havre, and La Rochelle.

She was then used to repatriate US nationals trapped in Spain, where a civil war had broken out in July. Carrying US consular officials, her first port of call on this mission was Bilbao on 13 December 1936.¹³ Leaving Bilbao on 15 December, she was in Gijon on the north coast on 17 December when the Republican-controlled city was shelled by Spanish Nationalist warships, including the battleship *España*. One of the 12-inch (304 mm) shells from the battleship landed with 300 yards (274 metres) of the *Erie*. She left Gijon for France, and deposited her refugees.¹⁴ Ordered back to the US, she made under rough crossing of the Atlantic, arriving back at the New York Navy Yard on 30 December after two months away.¹⁵

After her return to the US the ship spent a little time in drydock to repair minor damage she had suffered, with other work carried out and her hull repainted. She eventually left the dock on 1 March 1937

¹¹ USNI *Proceedings* (Vol 34, No 4, 2020).

¹² One of her officers was so badly injured he spent weeks in a hospital in England.

¹³ Here she also removed to safekeeping in the US 120 lb of certificates representing some \$400,000 in security assets owned by the New York City-based International Utilities Company.

<https://www.usserie.org>

¹⁴ Which included eight Filipinos, a Puerto Rican, and a Pole.

¹⁵ USNI *Proceedings* (Vol 34, No 4, 2020). <https://www.usserie.org>

The ship spent some as a midshipman trainer at the US Naval Academy at Annapolis, arriving in May 1937. This involved routine drills, either while docked or on short afternoon training cruises in the Chesapeake Bay, as well as coastal cruising exercises.

Originally ordered for departure to her new role in Panama in October 1937, it would in fact by January 1938 that she departed for Panama.¹⁶ This followed almost two and a half months of overhaul and ordinance installation in the New York Naval Yards, and being otherwise made ready for her service as flagship for the Special Service Squadron based in the Canal Zone.¹⁷ She finally left for Panama (via Guantanamo Bay) from the Naval Operating Base at Norfolk, Virginia on 25 January 1938.

From January 1938, the primary role of the sister ships was to be protecting the Canal Zone. They were also to alternate as flagships of the Special Service Squadron based in the Canal Zone. After transiting the Canal on 3 February, she reported for duty at Balboa at the Pacific end of the Canal. This would be her home port until she transferred to the Offshore Patrol–Atlantic of the Panama Sea Frontier, and subsequently the Caribbean Sea Frontier task force in 1942.¹⁸



Whilst based at Balboa, the *Erie* (and sister-ship *Charleston*) had their SOC-2 Seagull floatplanes removed.¹⁹ However, they would be replaced in due course by OS2U Kingfisher.

¹⁶ <https://www.usserie.org>

¹⁷ Aka “The Central American Banana Fleet”.

¹⁸ The Panama Naval Coastal Frontier was established 1 July 1941, and renamed the Panama Sea Frontier on 6 February 1942. Such “Sea Frontiers” were several commands of the US Navy, serving as areas of defence against enemy vessels, especially submarines, along the US coasts. They existed from 1 July 1941 and until, in some cases, the 1970s. The Caribbean Sea Frontier (CARIBSEAFRON) had responsibility for the protection of Allied shipping in the Caribbean and along the Atlantic Coast of South America during World War 2.

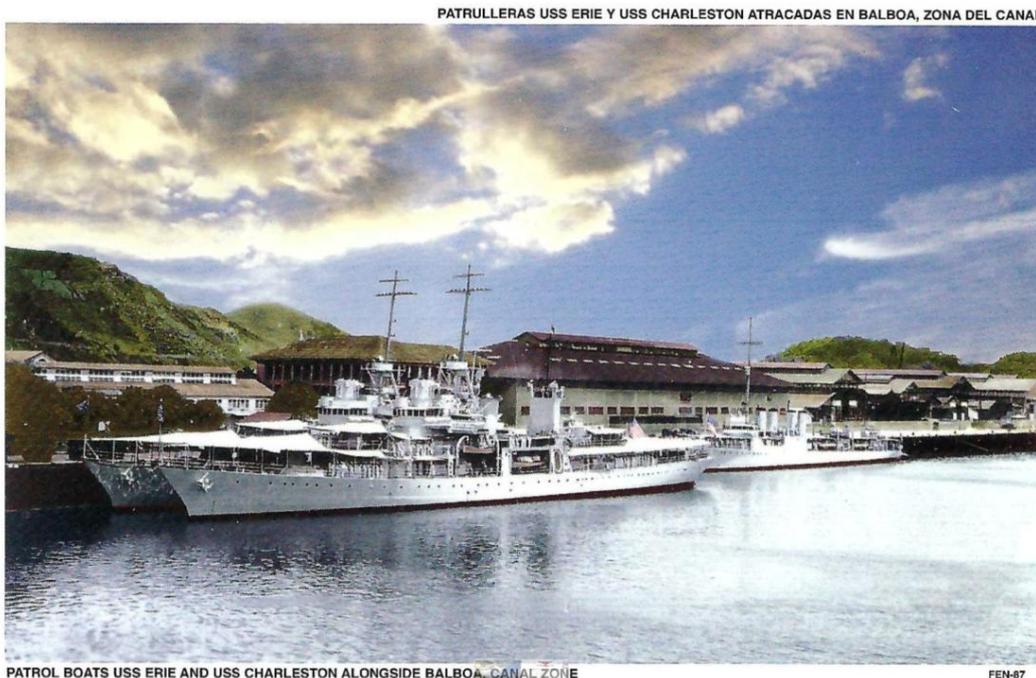
<https://www.usserie.org>

¹⁹ In his report for fiscal year 1938, the CNO reported that the aircraft were removed because of technical difficulties in handling the aircraft.

SPECIAL SERVICE SQUADRON

Between 1920 and 1940, this Squadron was the embodiment of US naval diplomacy of a region regarded as politically unstable following World War 1. It would both “show the flag”, and be used to deter or deal with instability in the region, as well as protecting US citizens and interests. On 51 occasions between 1920 and 1934, the State Department would request responses to political unrest and revolutionary violence in the Caribbean. This included supporting operations in Honduras in April 1925, and there were two major interventions: in Nicaragua from 1926 to 1933, and in Cuba to 1935.²⁰

The Navy Department formally abolished the Squadron on 17 September 1940, reassigning most of its vessels to the 15th Naval District in the Canal Zone. The *Erie*'s time with the Special Duties Squadron formally ended when it was disbanded.



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²⁰ The Cuban crisis saw the rise to power of Fulgencio Batista, the dictator who would eventually be ousted by Fidel Castro after World War 2.

Forward...from the start: U.S. Navy Fleet Deployment Policy, 1775–1996 by Peter M Swartz (Center for Naval Analyses Historical Paper, August 2021).

https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/forward-from-the-start-us-navy-fleet.pdf

²¹ Postcard produced by my friend, Clive Fennessy, one of many with Canal Zone themes.

By the time the *Erie* joined the Squadron, goodwill missions had become its primary concern, with the two new gunboats seen as ideal for this role. She spent three months from April to July on such a goodwill voyage, calling at 10 Central and South American ports.²² It was 21 July before the ship returned to her home port of Balboa, resuming her patrol duties.²³

In December 1938, she undertook a reconnaissance mission to the Galapagos Islands, far out in the Pacific, to determine their suitability for use in defending the Canal. On the same mission it took a survey team to the Cocos Islands, Costa Rican territory, which lay some 500 miles (805 km) west of Balboa.²⁴



She returned to Norfolk in January 1939, and on the way participated in a rescue of survivors from the crashed British Imperial Airways “Empire” flying boat called *Cavalier*. This aircraft had been flying from Port Washington, New York to Bermuda when it ditched on 21

January, in severe weather and around 285 miles (458 km) south-east of New York. Six passengers and four crew members were rescued by a tanker and taken to New York, but the search for the remaining two passengers and one crew member was fruitless.²⁵

The *Erie* transferred a doctor to the tanker, but high seas and darkness ended the search for any other survivors.²⁶

²² The tour was in two legs, with the ship returning to refuel and load fresh supplies on 11 June.

²³ <https://www.usserie.org>

²⁴ The proposal that the US acquire both the Galapagos and Cocos Islands had been put forward as long before as 1917. In 1939, two resolutions came before Congress recommending purchase of the Galapagos and Cocos Islands, which in 1938 it had been rumoured that Ecuador was willing to sell the Galapagos Islands. The Cocos Island, though small – around nine square miles (23.3 km²)- and lacking a good harbour, was thought able to accommodate an aircraft early warning station. In September 1940, Costa Rica formally offered the US a long-term lease of Cocos Island for use as a naval air base.

²⁵ In 1937, Imperial Airways and Pan American had opened a London-New York-Bermuda flying-boat passenger service, and Imperial Airways used the *Cavalier* on the route.

<https://aviation-safety.net/wikibase/342193>

²⁶ USNI *Proceedings* (Vol 34, No 4, 2020).

Arriving in New York on 23 January, she underwent an overhaul and refit that lasted until April. It was 18 May before the *Erie* returned to Balboa, and in June began another goodwill tour, this time spending five weeks visiting six ports in five countries (all in Central America) in the company of her sister-ship *Charleston*. The pair were back in Balboa on 5 August.

However, use of the sisters in the goodwill role turned out to be short-lived. The outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939, and the creation of the Neutrality Patrol as a consequence radically altered the operations of the Squadron.²⁷ Its commander was given the task of protecting the Canal Zone and policing the Caribbean and, on 5 September 1939, began patrolling to augment the activities of the 15th Naval District that had its headquarters in the Canal Zone.

During this period, the *Erie* tracked the German vessel *Havelland* for over three months.²⁸ This began in October, after the freighter left Puntarenas in Costa Rica, supposedly bound for the Canal Zone. When it did not arrive, this aroused suspicions and the *Erie* and aircraft were sent to look for her. She was discovered by aircraft heading, very slowly due to engine trouble, northwards and not south. When hailed by the *Erie* the German ship ran up a Dutch flag, before eventually using the correct one when challenged. The *Erie* proceeded to track the freighter as it approached and entered the port of Manzanillo on the Pacific coast of Mexico, and then spent six weeks monitoring the German ship's loading and offloading operations, sharing the harbour with her.²⁹

²⁷ Note that, although an international waterway, before the 1977 Treaties, the Panama Canal was neutral only as long as the US itself was neutral. See *American Neutrality in the 20th Century: the Impossible Dream* by John N Petrie (McNair Paper 33, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Washington DC, January 1995): <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/23491/mcnair33.pdf>

²⁸ This cargo vessel had been docked in Costa Rica when war broke out, having been on her way from the Philippines to US Gulf ports. After leaving Mexico on 28 June 1940, destined for Vladivostok, she would be subsequently interned in Japan, then returned to service, only to be torpedoed by the submarine USS *Gurnard* off Japan in 1943.

²⁹ USNI *Proceedings* (Vol 34, No 4, 2020).

This pursuit and monitoring caused some protests in the Mexican government and press.

On 4 September 1939, the Chief of Naval Operations ordered the establishment of a combined air and sea outer patrol for observing and reporting on movements of warships of the belligerent nations. The limits of the patrol were set about 300 miles (483 km) off the US East Coast and along the eastern boundary of the Caribbean Sea, including the whole Gulf of Mexico, and the entire Caribbean Sea.³⁰

The original mission of the Neutrality Patrol was purely that of observation and reporting, but from October “suspicious” vessels and warships were to be followed. These basic rules did not change until just before the US entry into the war in December 1941. Nonetheless, its operations expanded in 1940 with old destroyers being recommissioned and new patrol aircraft squadrons added.

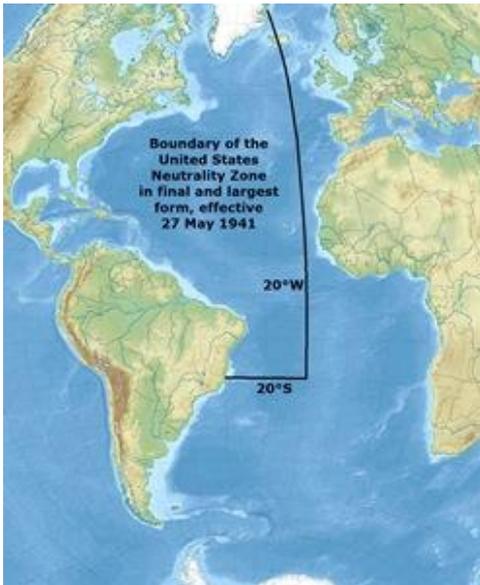
Also in October, the Declaration of Panama, approved by Conference of Foreign Ministers of American Republics meeting in Panama City, led to a Pan-American neutrality zone 300 miles (483 km) wide off the coasts of the US and Latin America. The patrols continued through 1941, but were rendered moot by the Pearl Harbor attack, and the subsequent declarations of war on the US by Germany and Italy.³¹

The *Erie* returned to Balboa on 11 December, but visited Manzanillo once more for the 23 to 31 December. Apparently, the US authorities had by now concluded that the German ship was carrying no contraband, and would not be leaving the port any time soon,³² and *Erie* returned to Balboa.

³⁰ *The Navy's Air War: A Mission Completed* by the Aviation History Unit OP-519B, DCNO (Air), edited by A R Buchanan, Lieutenant, USNR (Harper & Brothers, 1946).

³¹ https://ww2db.com/battle_spec.php?battle_id=336

³² She would eventually set sail for Vladivostok on 28 Juen 1940.



The *Erie* eventually returned to her home port of Balboa in January 1941, resuming patrolling for the 15th Naval District. By now the Navy Department had changed its mind over carriage of scout planes on the two gunboats, and in December had announced that they would be reinstated. It seems that it was felt that lack of the aircraft had hampered the Neutrality Patrol undertaken by the *Erie*.

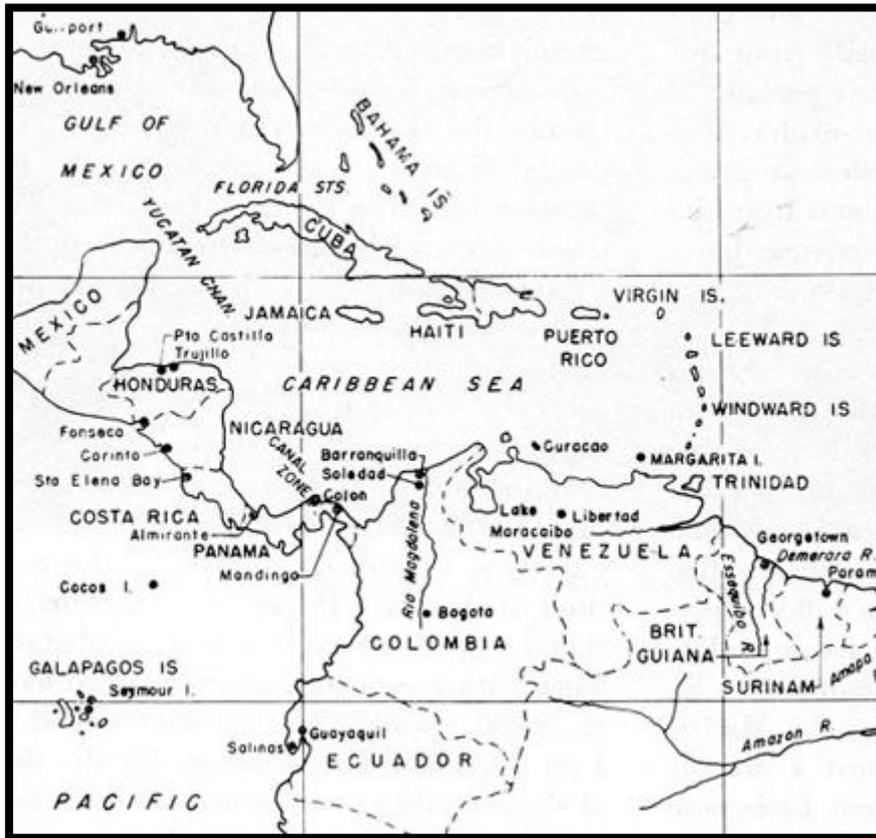
In March 1940, an unusual even involved the *Erie*. The acting President of Panama, Augusto Samuel Boyd, was treated to a recreation of the Battle of the River Platte, which had seen the German battleship *Graf Spee* intercepted and engaged by British cruisers, with the battleship eventually being scuttled off Montevideo. The *Erie* played the part of one of the British ships (HMS *Exeter*, which had actually transited the canal not long before the battle) with the *Charleston* as the *Graf Spee*. Smokescreens and simulated gunfire were employed for verisimilitude.

Patrolling continued throughout 1940, with a visit to Guayaquil in Ecuador undertaken in June/July. She returned there in August, taking US official and Ecuadorian military officers to the Galapagos Islands on an inspection visit.³³

In September 1940, the *Charleston* was assigned to the 13th Naval District in Seattle, while the *Erie* was assigned to the 15th Naval District, and the Special Duties Squadron was formally disbanded. In October, the *Erie* was ordered to prepare for a return to the US; leaving on 2 October for an extensive overhaul in New York Navy Yard. It would be 30 December before she set sail from the US for Panama once more, arriving at Cristobal on 4 January 1941.

³³ Formal approval for a US base on the islands would only be given after Pearl Harbor/

In January 1941, the ship was used in coastal waters, as part of inquiries into possible additional gun emplacements, and the mining of the waters on the Caribbean coast – of Panama as a whole, not just the Canal Zone. Following this, in April, she was part of a squadron sent to La Guaira, the harbour for Caracas, Venezuela and took on the first of several Venezuelan Navy officers for onboard training. She would return to make another short visit in August. Much of the rest of her time prior to the Pearl Harbor attack was taken up in routine patrols.



USS *Erie* was in the Canal Zone on 7 December 1941, moored alongside in Balboa. She was soon underway, operating as the flagship of the Offshore Patrol Force – Pacific.³⁴ It was not until just before midnight on 7 December that the *Erie* set sail to begin active patrolling of the Pacific approaches. Among the concerns was the presence of tuna fishing vessels that could be Japanese-owned or involve Japanese crew.³⁵ A number of vessels were checked, including one that required warning shots from the *Erie's*

³⁴ USNI *Proceedings* (Vol 34, No 4, 2020).

This was said to have been achieved with six hours, despite most of her crew being on shore leave.

³⁵ The Japanese dominated the prewar fishing sector in Panama. There had been many rumours of such boats being used for spying missions, and there were fears that they could be used for that, or for sabotage.

floatplane before stopping. Another one (manned by three US and seven Japanese nationals) was detained in Costa Rica.³⁶ The *Erie* collected the crew of the detained vessel, plus 28 other Japanese interned by Costa Rica, and took these, and the fishing vessel, back to the Canal Zone.

Resuming her patrol, the *Erie* continued checks of tuna boats, detaining another Japanese crewman and seizing another fishing vessel. She also answered a distress call from a Costa Rican vessel, towing it safely into Puntarenas in Costa Rica despite rough seas. In all, she would return to Balboa with 32 Japanese prisoners, said to include a Commander and two Lieutenant Commanders of the Japanese Imperial Navy.³⁷

On 8 December, the Panama Sea Frontier (PSF) was formally established, stretching out for 1,000 miles (1,609 km) in all directions. Such “Frontiers” were created by the US Navy from July 1941 (originally as Naval Coastal Frontiers), as areas of defence against enemy vessels, especially submarines, along the US coasts. They generally started at the shore of the US and extended outwards into the sea for a nominal distance of 200 miles (321 km). In the Caribbean there was the Panama, Caribbean Sea, and Gulf Sea Frontiers.

Erie's second war patrol began on 20 December, and included assisting in the establishment of a patrol flying-boat refuelling base on the Galapagos Islands,³⁸ spending Christmas 1941 at the islands. She then proceeded to Ecuador, to establish

³⁶ After attempting to escape and being pursued by USAAC bombers.

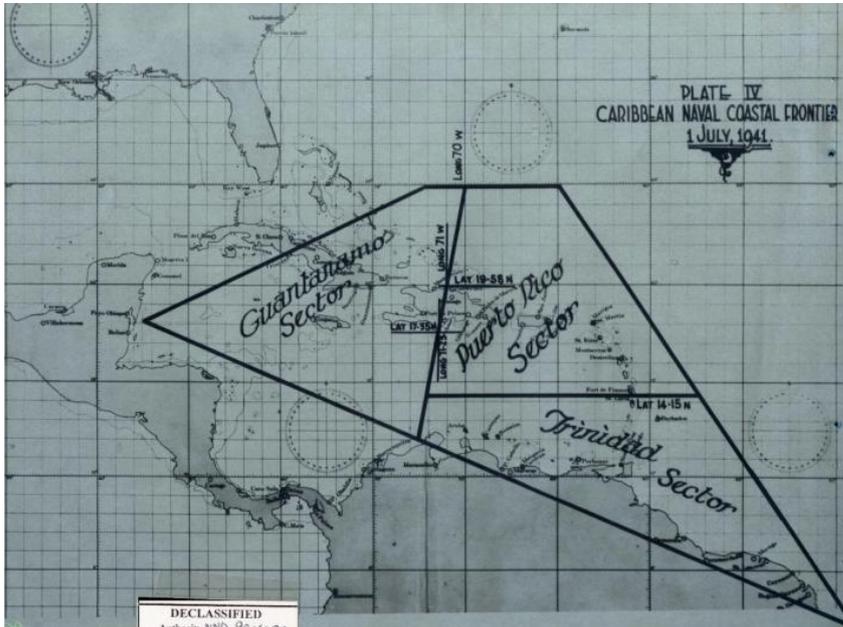
³⁷ <https://www.usserie.org>

³⁸ The US Army had long advocated having a base on the islands (purchase of them was also proposed by the Commanding General in the Canal Zone in 1939, something that had been proposed before, in 1911), being seen as a vital base to facilitate the long-range air patrols felt necessary to safeguard the Pacific approaches to the Canal. In 1940, the General Board of the Navy and the Army-Navy Joint Board had recommended patrol seaplanes be based in the islands. In the event, an agreement was reached with Ecuador for a base on the islands, and a flying-boat refuelling site was established. In May 1942, Army bombers reached the islands, and PT Boats would also use the islands. The islands became the focal point for the wide arc of air patrols over the Pacific approaches to the Canal, with patrol aircraft based there, and operating on patrols from Corinto in Nicaragua to Salinas in Ecuador.

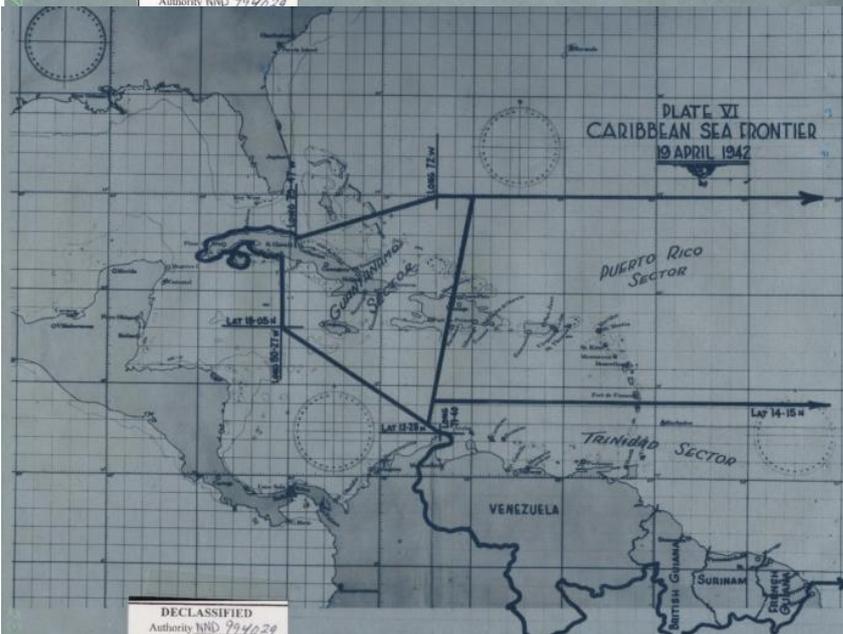
Building the Navy's Bases in World War II: A History of the Bureau of Yards and Docks, 1940-1946, Volume 2 (US Government Printing Office, Washington, 1947).

<https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/b/building-the-navys-bases/building-the-navys-bases-vol-2.html>

flying-boat moorings at Santa Elena Bay, before arriving back at Balboa on New Year's Day 1942, to undergo another overhaul.³⁹ By the end of January she had made another trip to the Galapagos Islands with replacement men and stores.



*The Caribbean Naval Coastal Frontier on 1 July 1941⁴⁰
Aka the Caribbean Sea Frontier, it was disestablished on 5 November 1947*



The Caribbean Sea Frontier, 19 April 1942⁴¹

In February 1942, she commenced her first convoy escort mission, comprising troopships headed to Australia. There was also the claimed first contact with an

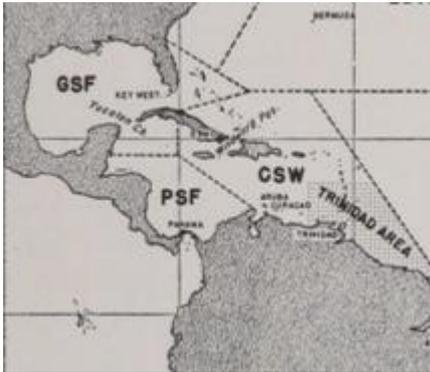
³⁹ <https://www.usserie.org>

⁴⁰ *A History of the United States Caribbean Defense Command (1941-1947)* by Cesar A. Vasquez (Florida International University, FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations No. 2458, 2016): <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2458>

⁴¹ Ibid.

The Naval Coastal Frontiers - Eastern, Gulf, Caribbean, Panama, Hawaiian, Northwest, Western, Philippine - were redesignated as Sea Frontiers in February 1942.

enemy submarine,⁴² on her return to Balboa after leaving the convoy north-west of the Galapagos Islands.



Map showing the positions of the Panama, Caribbean and Gulf Sea Frontiers

Further convoy escort and general patrol duties in the Pacific followed, as well as further trips to the Galapagos Islands, where a substantial base was being developed, and surveying sites for a planned PT Boat base in Nicaragua.

In June 1942, she returned to the Atlantic end of the Canal to join the Offshore Patrol-Atlantic, established on 1 June in the face of an increasing U-boat threat.⁴³ This force only lasted a matter of weeks before being disbanded on 23 June as part of a larger reorganisation. While it lasted, for the most part, its component vessels acted independently, patrolling, convoying individual ships and investigating suspicious activities.⁴⁴

Regional convoy began to be established, including between Trinidad and the Canal Zone and Guantanamo Bay. However, until June, U-Boats had only entered the outer reaches of the Panama Sea Frontier.⁴⁵

⁴² Which seems unlikely, as neither Japanese or German submarines are thought to have reached the region. Later, Japanese boats would reach the West Coast of the US, but not the Panama Sea Frontier, and German U-boats never ventured this far. Whatever the truth of the claimed contact, the ship took on a lot more depth charges when back in port. There would be more, false, submarine contacts in the Pacific before the ship moved to the Caribbean.

⁴³ USNI *Proceedings* (Vol 34, No 4, 2020).

⁴⁴ <https://www.usserie.org>

⁴⁵ This was based at Balboa and responsible for the defence of the Pacific and Atlantic approaches to the Canal and for naval shore facilities in the Central America region during the war.



On the night of 11 June 1942, she responded to emergency flares and rescued 46 survivors of the 7,000-ton freighter *Fort Good Hope*, which had been torpedoed by a U-boat, U-159. The freighter, which had been on its maiden voyage from Vancouver, had left Cristobal in the Canal Zone on the 10 June, heading for Key West. It had been part of a small convoy of just two merchant ships escorted by the *Erie* when the U-boat had attacked. The *Erie* carried out a search for the submarine, apparently spotted signs and dropped six depth charges without result.⁴⁶

Three days later, on 14 June, while on patrol, the *Erie* was directed by a patrol aircraft to a lifeboat carrying 23 survivors from the 8,000-ton collier *Lebore*, which had been sunk by U-172 about 200 nautical miles (230 miles, 370 km) north of Cristobal. It also collected 28 others, who had made it to nearby St Andrews Island in a lifeboat about 18 hours after the attack. The next day, she and the destroyer USS *Tattnall* (DD-125) rescued eight Armed Guards from the *Lebore*,⁴⁷ as well as 49 survivors of the Dutch 4,000-ton passenger-freighter *Crijnssen*, sunk by U-506 on 11 June, whom

⁴⁶ <https://uboat.net/allies/merchants/ship/1788.html>

⁴⁷ The survivors of the *Fort Good Hope* had included four Armed Guards. In January 1942, the US Navy had established the Naval Armed Guard to man the defensive armament mounted on US merchant vessels (including those under the Panamanian flag). The gun crew were usually led by a junior naval officer and lived alongside the ship's civilian crew. 144,857 men would serve on 6,200 ships.

the *Lebore* had rescued before being attacked herself.⁴⁸ All the survivors were delivered to Cristobal on 17 June.⁴⁹

BATTLE OF THE CARIBBEAN

This was the Allies name for the fight against the U-boats in 1942-43 – the Germans called it Operation *Neuland*. Between February and August 1942, no fewer than 330 vessels were sunk by U-boats and Italian submarines in the Caribbean, its approaches and the Gulf of Mexico. They came close to cutting off vital supplies of oil from Venezuela and bauxite ore (for making aluminium) from the Guianas.⁵⁰

Even at its peak, there were never more than 10 U-boats in the Caribbean. Initially, without radar or a coordinated convoy system in place, the U-boats enjoyed great success. However, shipping losses gradually reduced, as improved defences (including airborne radar), convoy tactics (with surface vessel, airship⁵¹ and patrol aircraft escorts), and new or improved bases throughout the region, were put in place.

After August 1942, when the U-boats were largely redirected elsewhere, the battle was effectively over. In October 1942, for the first time in six months, there were no losses to U-Boats in the Gulf of Mexico and Panama Sea Frontier areas.⁵² In fact, after January 1943, U-Boats were never again a major threat in the Caribbean. Attacks continued, and losses continued, but the Kriegsmarine regarded the Caribbean as a difficult or dangerous place to operate.⁵³

⁴⁸ https://uboat.net/allies/merchants/ship/1782.html#google_vignette

Amazingly, the *Crijnssen* was carrying 23 survivors from other ships when it too was torpedoed. These included one survivor from US tanker sunk by an Italian submarine on 31 March.

⁴⁹ https://uboat.net/allies/merchants/ship/1799.html#google_vignette

⁵⁰ *Panama Canal defenders: Camouflage and Markings of US Sixth Air Force and Antilles Air Command 1941-1945 – Volume 1: Single-engined Fighters* by Dan Hagedorn (Model Centrum PROGRES, 2021).

⁵¹ https://www.centennialofflight.net/essay/Lighter_than_air/Airships_in_WWII/LTA10.htm

⁵² However, in November, losses to U-Boats rose in the Trinidad area

⁵³ <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/ETO/Atlantic/UBoat-Caribbean.html>



Location of attack on *Lebore*.



Location of attack on *Fort Good Hope*.

After more convoy escort work, the ship received an overhaul in the docks at Balboa in August/September, as usual the Mechanical Division of The Panama Canal carried out the work. A replacement floatplane was also installed, as was a new radar system.

On 16 August, she was ordered leave the Panama Sea Frontier, and report to the Commander of the Caribbean Sea Frontier at Guantanamo Bay. After trials, the ship left Balboa on 24 September and transited the Canal to the Caribbean, officially transferring to the new command on 28 September before setting out as part of the escort of a convoy bound for Guantanamo Bay, arriving without loss on 2 October. She left again on 4 October, as part of an escort for a convoy bound for the Canal Zone, but she and another gunboat were detached to join a different convoy heading to Aruba, Curacao and Trinidad, again with all ships arriving at their destination. A week later, there was more convoy escort work, with a 19-ship one (21 by the time it reached Guantanamo Bay) safely escorted from Trinidad. Yet another convoy was safely escorted to Aruba, Curacao and Trinidad, arriving in the latter on 1 November.

In November, she was in Trinidad, as escort leader of convoy TAG-20 heading to Guantanamo Bay. Whilst *Erie* had been in Trinidad, the two preceding convoys had lost six and two ships respectively, and intelligence reports indicated that at least two U-boats were operating in areas where they might attack TAG-20.

On 10 November, she sailed through the Gulf of Paria, the semi-enclosed inland sea located between the island of Trinidad and Venezuela, and met up with the convoy of

13 merchant vessels and five other escorts. The convoy diverted from the standard route, sailing to the west and finally north-west to join up with two smaller convoys just off Willemstad, capital of Curaçao. This was done to avoid a U-boat known to be working the waters to the east of Aruba.⁵⁴

TORPEDOING AND LOSS

On 12 November 1942, at 1732, just about an hour after joining with the additional ships off Curacao, *Erie* was torpedoed by U-163.⁵⁵ *Erie's* captain⁵⁶ and navigator saw two torpedoes heading towards the warship, managed to avoid one, but the other struck the ship aft, at about the position of the number four gun turret. Six crew died (a seventh died later), and a fire broke out after the aviation gasoline storage tank (for the Kingfisher scout aircraft) blew up. The aircraft itself had been dislodged by the torpedo strike, falling overboard.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ USNI *Proceedings* (Vol 34, No 4, 2020).

⁵⁵ U-163 was a Type IXC U-boat on its second patrol. It had been hiding among the new ships waiting for the *Erie* and its convoy. Like the majority of U-boats, it had a short life, having been commissioned in October 1941, and lost with all 57 crew off Cape Finisterre in March 1943. In three patrols, she sank just 3 merchant vessels, plus the *Erie*.

<https://uboat.net/boats/u163.htm>

⁵⁶ Andrew R Mack, who had been captain of the *Erie* from 6 June 1940. He would be awarded a Silver Star “for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity” following the incident. With the ship on fire, sinking by the stern, with ammunition exploding and many of those in damage control and firefighting lost or overboard, he kept the vessel in motion under auxiliary power and was largely responsible for the ship being salvaged and towed to port. He would later receive the Legion of Merit for his “meritorious conduct” while commanding officer of a naval sectional drydock in the South Pacific 1943-44. He would go on to become a Rear Admiral.

<https://valor.militarytimes.com/recipient/recipient-56005/>

Following the Captain’s recommendations, a number of medals, commendation ribbons and promotions were also awarded to members of the crew.

⁵⁷ USNI *Proceedings* (Vol 34, No 4, 2020).

The floatplane, 23 metres down, became a popular dive site postwar. In 2022, a group of divers visited and photographed what was left, recovering one small part which was donated to a museum at a dive shop in Willemstad.

<https://curacaopictures.com/en/underwater/dive-log/718-salvage-of-the-float-of-the-waterplane-at-the-crash-site>

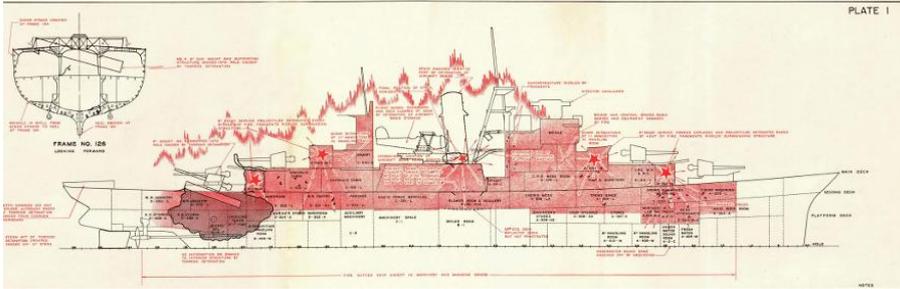


Diagram showing where torpedo struck⁵⁸

While seriously damaged, holed in the hull, with its deck cracked, and with one of its two propellers out of action, the captain managed to save the ship and beach it, on a shelf about 100 yards (91 metres) offshore, and about 11 miles (17.7 km) from Willemstad. As burning oil threatened to engulf the entire ship, the captain ordered abandon ship at 1832.⁵⁹ The fire (which would burn for another three days before being extinguished)⁶⁰ resulted in the ship being a near-total loss.⁶¹



Our Navy magazine reports the attack on the Erie in a December 1942 issue⁶²

DAMAGED BY SUB ATTACK Navy Recruiting Bureau
The Navy Department announced November 13 that the gunboat USS Erie had been damaged by an enemy submarine attack and beached off the southern coast of Curacao in the Dutch West Indies. No report of casualties had been received at that time.

A Dutch sloop, HNLMS *Van Kinsbergen*,⁶³ rescued crewmembers who had been blown from the ship, and the USS *Spry* (PG-64)⁶⁴ pulled alongside the *Erie*, trying to fight the fires with her hoses.

⁵⁸ <https://www.usserie.org>

⁵⁹ As the crew was mustered safely ashore, two 100 lb bombs intended for use on the Kingfisher, and two 325 lb depth charges exploded, toppling the funnel.

⁶⁰ After a Bureau of Ships firefighting team (and specialised equipment) had arrived from the Norfolk Navy Yard in 15 November.

⁶¹ In addition to lost or missing firefighters, those fighting the fire were hampered by inadequate equipment. They had only fire extinguishers and two fire hoses with just 30 lb of pressure. Nevertheless, the attached a garden hose to a galley sink spigot, and formed a bucket chain.

⁶² <https://www.usserie.org>

⁶³ Which had been in Curacao when Germany invaded the Netherlands in May 1940, and was put under Royal Navy command, spending much of the rest of the war in the Caribbean region.

⁶⁴ A British-built *Flower Class* corvette, ordered by the French Navy but commissioned into the Royal Navy in 1942, and then transferred to the US Navy in May 1942 as PG-64.

https://uboat.net/allies/warships/ship/4745.html#google_vignette

As her machinery appeared to be in good condition, she was deemed to be salvageable, and work began on 19 November, with the ship refloated.⁶⁵ On 28 November 1942, she was towed to Willemstad by three tugs.⁶⁶ An inspection team arrived to determine whether the ship was indeed salvageable and could be rebuilt by the facilities at the Panama Canal.

The inspection on 3-4 December decided that salvaging her was feasible but, while awaiting an opportunity to move into the harbour's only drydock,⁶⁷ on 5 December, she heeled over, and settled on the harbour bed.⁶⁸ The final sinking was probably caused by the failure of a watertight door, and the counter-flooding ordered as a result.⁶⁹

On 6 December, the Commander of the 15th Naval District recommended to the Vice Chief of Naval Operations that further attempts to salvage and recondition the vessel were impractical and that the hulk should be left in the harbour at Willemstad. Now that she was deemed to be irreparable, she was struck from the Naval List on 28 July 1943.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Some 375 tons of debris and liquids were removed from the hulk.

⁶⁶ Two were local, with one (on contract to the Navy) sent from Panama.

⁶⁷ With the intention to make repairs that would enable safe towing to the Canal Zone for further repairs and reconstruction by the Mechanical Division of The Panama Canal.

⁶⁸ <https://www.usserie.org/Documents/assets/Salvage%20Operations%20and%20Capsizing%20Memo.pdf>
<https://www.usserie.org/Documents/assets/STRUCTURAL%20REPAIRS%20IN%20FORWARD%20AREAS%20IN%20WORLD%20WAR%20II.pdf>

⁶⁹ <https://www.usserie.org/page2/page2.html>

⁷⁰ On 9 December, the captain of the *Erie* despatched a comprehensive report on the loss of the ship to the Secretary of the Navy, and Commander of the Caribbean Sea Frontier.
<https://www.usserie.org/Documents/assets/Torpedoing%20Fire%20and%20Beaching%20of%20USS%20ERIE.pdf>



The damaged hulk

The ship remained lying in Willemstad harbour until December 1952, when her hulk was refloated once more on 9 December, by USS *Opportune*,⁷¹ towed to deeper water (300 fathoms) and scuttled, some 4,600 yards (4206 metres, 2.6 miles or 4.2 km) from the harbour entrance.⁷²

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

22 February 2026

⁷¹ A rescue and salvage ship, probably most memorable as being the first US Navy ship to be commanded by a woman, in 1990-93, and her use in recovery of the Space Shuttle *Challenger* in 1986.

⁷² USNI *Proceedings* (Vol 34, No 4, 2020).

The operation required three US Navy salvage vessels, and a 1,000-ton floating seagoing barge.

<https://www.usserie.org/Documents/assets/ERIE%20Progress%20Report%20No%2048%2010%20Dec%201952.pdf>

<https://www.usserie.org/Documents/assets/DOD%20Press%20Release%20on%20Removal%20of%20ERI%2019%20Dec%201952.pdf>

Postscript: The USS *Charleston* (PG-51) survived the war, including operating in Alaska – far removed from the tropics of her envisaged Panama Canal role - being decommissioned in May 1946 and transferred to the Massachusetts Maritime Academy in March 1948. She was returned to the US Maritime Administration for disposal in 1959, and reportedly sold to an Italian investor with plans for conversion into a floating night club/hotel.