

Sometimes the things that almost happened are as interesting as the things that did. Nearly every photo history book of World War II shows the famous picture of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt meeting with Winston Churchill and Josef Stalin at Tehran in November 1943. The accompanying caption usually mentions something about the meeting solidifying the alliance that would go on to win World War II. Rarely mentioned, however, is that the historic moment might never have occurred—because the president, the entire Joint Chiefs of Staff and numerous other top American leaders on board USS *Iowa* were nearly victims of a torpedo attack on the way to the summit. This important fact is overlooked because it was not an enemy attack that could have killed the president but a torpedo fired from an American destroyer in a torpedo drill gone awry.

The shot that almost changed history was fired by *William D. Porter*, known to those who sailed on it or found themselves in its sights as the “Willie Dee,” one of hundreds of destroyers the United States built in a hurry as it became obvious that much of the country’s participation in the expanding global war would be at sea. The destroyer was put into service in July 1943, with a crew of 125 young men who, but for just a few experienced hands scattered here and there, were all in high school or working on a farm while the ship was being built. They were as fresh as the ship on which they served.

But that was the military in 1943—lots of eager young men hoping to learn their jobs before someone started shooting at them. Time for training was short, so barely four months after Willie Dee hit the water, it was assigned to one of the most critical and super secret missions the Navy had yet undertaken. President Roosevelt was traveling to French North Africa to meet with Churchill, Stalin and Chinese Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. No one was to know about the trip until the commander in chief arrived safely.

Roosevelt boarded the massive battleship *Iowa* on November 12, 1943, along with Secretary of State Cordell Hull, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and enough VIPs and top aides to awe even the most imperturbable sailor. The president’s party, numbering about 80 souls, had all slipped out of Washington as quietly and discreetly as possible aboard Roosevelt’s presidential yacht *Potomac*, and had cruised down the Potomac River to rendezvous with *Iowa* at the river’s mouth in Chesapeake Bay. The 45,000-ton battleship, traveling up the bay from its berth in Norfolk, Va., to meet *Potomac*, had to discharge nearly all of its fuel just to keep from running aground in the river.

“We didn’t know what we were doing in Chesapeake Bay until we saw the president’s yacht come alongside,” recalls Grier Sims, a crew member on board *Iowa*. “They had installed a bathtub when we were in Norfolk, and we were all asking what the hell a bathtub is doing on a battleship. Then it made sense when the president came on board.”

The president was taken aboard in his wheelchair with no fanfare, then *Iowa* slipped silently out to sea with strict orders to lie low and make no radio contact. The battleship was joined by two escort aircraft carriers, which would provide air cover, and three destroyers to provide protection from the German submarines that were still wreaking havoc on ships in the Atlantic. One of those destroyers was Willie Dee.

The mission was simple but critical: Get Roosevelt and his entourage to Mers-el-Kebir in French North Africa for the first of the high level summits between the Allied leaders. The ships traveled at high speed all the way across the Atlantic, with the smaller destroyers struggling to keep up. Most of the sailors in the convoy did not know the purpose of their secret mission, or that the president was on board *Iowa*, but the tension among the officers signaled that they were involved in some sort of high stakes operation.

“On the *Iowa* we knew he was on board but most of us didn’t really see him much,” Sims says. “We didn’t know where we were going, but we were at flank speed all the time, so that thing was shaking. We were really moving.”

Even at maximum speed, the trip would take eight days, so during the voyage the ships and their crews continued with the training and drills that they normally conducted when at sea. Such activity was important to keep the men busy, and in the case of Willie Dee, to better prepare its relatively green crew for life at sea.

The destroyer’s trip got off to a rough start. As Captain Wilfred Walter backed Willie Dee out of its berth next to another ship in Norfolk, there was a god-awful racket. As Walter and the other officers looked off the bridge, they saw that their ship wasn’t coming apart—Willie Dee’s anchor had snagged the Navy ship beside it and ripped off its railing, life rafts, a small boat and various other pieces of equipment. Although it wreaked havoc on its neighbor, Willie Dee’s damage was limited to scratches on its anchor. Rushing to meet his rendezvous with *Iowa*, Walter only had time to make a quick apology before his destroyer continued on to its way.

Within the first 48 hours of the secret mission, Willie Dee continued drawing uncomplimentary attention to itself. At one point after joining the rest of the convoy, the ships were making their way through an area known to be infested with U-boats when a large explosion suddenly rocked the water. All the ships immediately initiated antisubmarine maneuvers and went on high alert, until Willie Dee signaled that there was no submarine. The explosion was just one of its own depth charges that had accidentally fallen off the ship because the trigger was not set on “safe” as it should have been.

Soon after that embarrassment, Willie Dee was hit by a freak wave that washed a man overboard, never to be found. Quick on the heels of that mishap the engine room lost power for a while, causing the destroyer to fall far behind the rest of the convoy. By then, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Ernest J. King, who was on board *Iowa*, had become aware of Willie Dee’s difficul-

ties and, with so many personages looking over his shoulder, the head of the Navy was becoming increasingly embarrassed and frustrated. He made his displeasure known to Captain Walter, who knew that he was fumbling a career opportunity on this high profile mission. Duly admonished, Willie Dee's skipper vowed to improve his ship's performance for the rest of the trip and ensured that his crew trained hard while at sea.

The other crews were hard at work also, and on November 14, when the convoy was just east of Bermuda, *Iowa's* captain offered to show Roosevelt and his aides how the battleship could defend itself against an air attack. As *Iowa* fired its defensive guns at weather balloons sent aloft as targets, and the president sat on deck enjoying the show, Walter and his crew watched from 6,000 yards away and grew eager to join in the fun. They got their chance when the battleship missed a few of the target balloons, which drifted into range of Willie Dee's guns. Seeing an opportunity to redeem himself, Walter quickly sent his crew to battle stations, and the gunners commenced firing on the balloons. At the same time, he ordered the crew to conduct a drill in which they would practice launching torpedoes at another ship.

So down belowdecks in the torpedo rooms, crewmen Lawton Dawson and Tony Fazio started simulating a real combat situation. The only difference between a drill and the real thing was that in a drill, Dawson and Fazio first removed all the primers that launched the torpedoes out of Willie Dee's four tubes. Without the primers, the firing signal could not cause the explosion needed to expel the torpedos from the tubes into the water. To carry out the simulated attack, the torpedo crew needed a target. As was common in drills, they used any nearby ship. The biggest and

easiest target they could see was *Iowa*.

**When Dawson and Fazio were ready,** the bridge officer sent the commands for the simulated firing and the torpedo crew below "fired" a torpedo. After a pause in which he normally would have confirmed that the torpedo was on its way, the bridge officer continued the drill with "Fire 2!" As expected, there was another pause and then he commanded "Fire 3!"

This time, his command was confirmed with a "whooooooosh" as the torpedo flew out of its tube and into the water—to the astonishment and horror of the officers on the bridge. A live torpedo was in the water and headed straight for *Iowa*.

Officers on Willie Dee's bridge started racing around, barking orders and calling for confirmation that what they feared was happening was in fact happening. At most, the torpedo might take two minutes to reach *Iowa*, and battleships can't turn on a dime, so there was no time to waste.

Walter ordered a warning immediately sent to *Iowa*. But the secret convoy was under strict orders not to use the radio. Instead, a signalman was to signal the battleship by flashing light. Unfortunately, in his haste and inexperience, the young sailor first flashed that a torpedo was in the water but moving away from *Iowa*. Becoming more flustered as he watched the torpedo swim toward the battleship, he tried again and somehow signaled that Willie Dee was going in reverse at full speed.

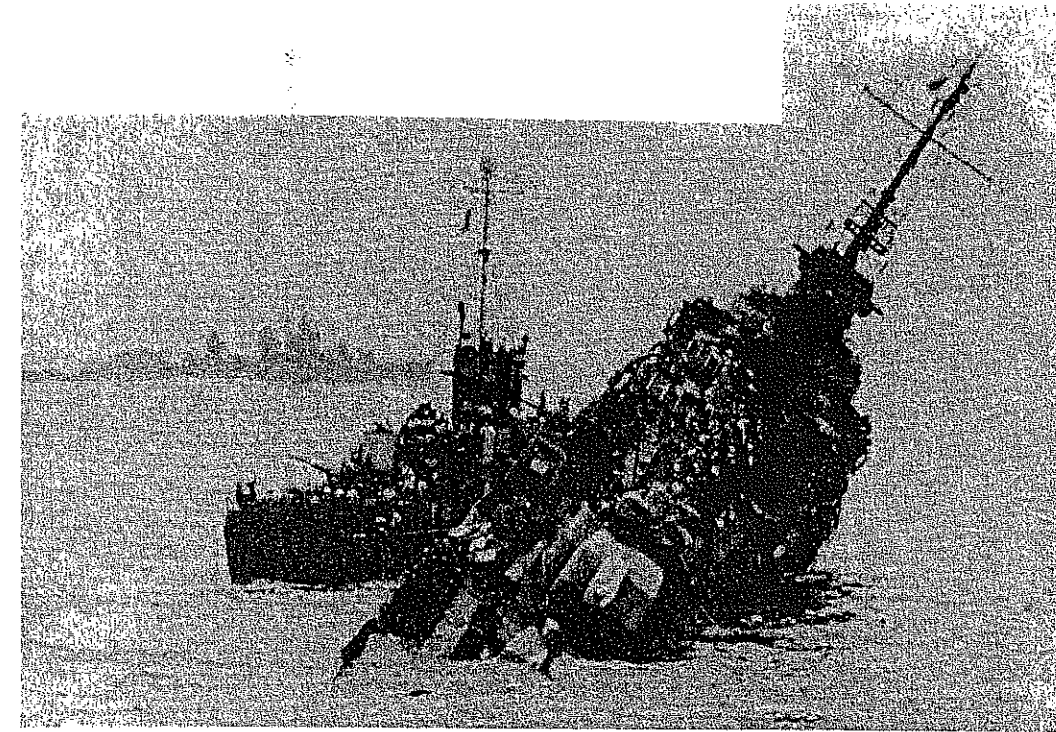
Walter realized the flash signals weren't going to work, and he was running out of time, so he decided to break radio silence. Willie Dee's radioman quickly called to *Iowa* using its code name: "Lion, Lion, come right!"

The radioman on *Iowa*, surprised to hear anyone on the air, responded by calmly asking who was calling and why: "Identify and say again. Where is submarine?"

Willie Dee's operator responded with "Torpedo in the water! Lion, come right! Emergency! Come right, Lion! Come right!"

And then there was no more response from *Iowa*, because at about the same moment the lookout on the battleship had spotted the fish and was screaming: "Torpedo on our starboard quarter! This is not a drill! Torpedo on our starboard quarter!"

*Iowa* turned sharply right and increased speed as its guns began firing on the incoming torpedo. Walter and his crew on Willie Dee could only watch and hope the big ship made the turn in time.



Following its humiliating performance as an escort, Willie Dee (pictured in camouflage colors at top left) was sent to the Aleutian Islands and later the western Pacific. In late March 1945, it began picket duty off Okinawa and was mortally damaged by a kamikaze (bottom left) on June 10. Although they knew their ship was the laughing-stock of the Navy, the crew of Willie Dee learned from their mistakes and went on to perform with skill and professionalism. Despite losing the ship off Okinawa, the survivors of the ill-fated destroyer (above) could be proud of its wartime service.

TOP LEFT AND BOTTOM LEFT: NATIONAL ARCHIVES; RIGHT: WWW.WARSHIPBOOK.INFO.COM VIA RON CAMPBELL

The battleship sounded its General Quarters alarm, and the crew began racing to emergency stations. Those on deck soon saw the incoming torpedo as the ship leaned heavily to the left in a desperate maneuver. The list was so pronounced that Roosevelt's bodyguards had to steady his wheelchair. One of the guards even reached for his pistol with the intent of shooting the torpedo as it came closer.

As the crew of Willie Dee held their breath and watched, the battleship made the turn in time, and the torpedo exploded in the big ship's wake. Roosevelt later made a note in his diary about the trip that said: "On Monday last a gun drill. *Porter* fired a torpedo at us by mistake. We saw it—missed it by 1,000 feet."

Walter and the Willie Dee crew could breathe again, but for them the incident was far from over. Once *Iowa* came back into formation, Walter could see that the battleship's guns were trained on the destroyer that had just fired on the president. Soon *Iowa* radioed to ask what in the world had happened. "We did it," was Walter's reply.

After quickly conferring with his own crew, who had no immediate explanation for how the torpedo ended up in the water, a red-faced Walter tried to assure *Iowa* that the whole thing was just an accident. Under the circumstances, however, suspicions ran high, and the hard luck Willie Dee was ordered out of the convoy. *Iowa* continued on to North Africa and delivered the president for his history-making summit, but Willie Dee was

sent to a U.S. naval station in Bermuda. Fully armed U.S. Marines greeted the ship as it docked and placed the entire crew under arrest—the first time ever that a U.S. Navy crew was arrested en masse.

Willie Dee's crew was grilled in a secret inquiry whose first purpose was to determine whether the ship had been infiltrated by a saboteur. Was firing the torpedo a simple boneheaded mistake or part of a larger conspiracy to assassinate Roosevelt and derail the Allies' summit?

**It took several days of testimony** for the board of inquiry to determine that the live primer had been left in torpedo tube 3 by accident, rather than by someone using it deliberately during a drill, which meant that there was no conspiracy. Willie Dee's crew had just screwed up in a big way. Exactly how remained a mystery until crewman Dawson finally confessed that he had lied in his first testimony, in which he claimed to have no idea how the live primer was left in place. Coming clean, he told the board that, in fact, he had accidentally left the primer in place when he removed the other three from the torpedo tubes. When the torpedo fired unexpectedly, he panicked and threw the used primer overboard.

One officer, Lieutenant William Poindexter, explained to the board of inquiry that "the inexperience of the personnel of the

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*William D. Porter*, men as well as officers," must be considered as a partial explanation for the accident. Of 16 officers junior to Poindexter, only four had any experience on a ship before coming to Willie Dee.

Nevertheless, Willie Dee had nearly killed the president, so someone had to be punished. For the initial mistake and his subsequent cover-up, the 22-year-old Dawson was sentenced to 14 years of hard labor. But when Roosevelt heard of the sentence, he ordered the Navy not to punish Dawson since the incident was clearly a mistake and no harm had been done. Maybe not, but in almost sinking *Iowa*, Willie Dee became known in the Navy as a screw-up ship to watch out for.

After 1943 the ship was commonly hailed by other ships with the greeting: "Don't shoot! We're Republicans!" Willie Dee became a black sheep, and sailors like Bill Glover, a 17-year-old from Montgomery, Ala., when he joined the destroyer in 1944, were not happy about being assigned to it. "In less than a year after launching, it had done several things we heard about, so I didn't want to go to the *Porter*," he said. "They acknowledged it when I got on board, laughed about it some. Nobody had gotten hurt, so you could joke about it some. And plus, there was a war on so we had other things to do." Besides, Glover said, Willie Dee didn't screw up any more than the typical Navy ship run with inexperienced crews who had never been to sea. Willie Dee drew attention with a particularly dramatic error involving the president, but similar mistakes happened all the time as young crews learned on the job, he remembered.

"Once you've fired a torpedo at Roosevelt, then everyone is looking at you and you get noticed for all the little things that everyone else is doing too," Glover said. "There were a lot of rookies in the service in 1943. Mistakes were made because 17-year-olds don't know how not to make mistakes." Glover pointed out a fact largely forgotten in the victory of World War II: In the scramble to gear up in the early days of the war, the nation was sending brand new ships to sea with crews so young and inexperienced that they were quite literally learning everything as they went.

Still, the shadow of that ill-timed shot continued to haunt Willie Dee. Seeing how the destroyer had performed in a high profile task such as guarding the president's secret convoy, the Navy thought the ship might be better off in an assignment where it could do little harm.

The destroyer was sent to the Aleutian Islands for a year, and while serving in the frigid waters off Alaska the crew worked hard to vindicate their ship's reputation.

Although they performed well, their ship seemed to be haunted by a Jonah and unable to entirely shake its embarrassing past. During a break in exercises in the Aleutians a sailor came back to the ship drunk after leave and decided he wanted to fire one of Willie Dee's big guns. He fired the weapon before anyone could stop him, having no idea where the 5-inch shell would land. Unfortunately, it just happened to land in the front yard of the base commandant's home while he was having a little party for fellow officers and their wives. Fortunately, the only damage was to the destroyer's already unenviable reputation.

With the naval war in the Pacific reaching its climax, however, the Navy concluded that even Willie Dee was needed for the final campaigns. With a more seasoned crew, Willie Dee left the Aleutian Islands for the western Pacific performing escort duty to the Philippines and taking part in the operations at Mindoro and Lingayen Gulf. In late March 1945, *Porter* was sent to Okinawa, where it patrolled far out in the ocean to intercept Japanese aircraft before they got in close to the bigger ships. On one patrol, Willie Dee was fighting off kamikazes, each loaded with enough explosives to easily sink a destroyer. As one of the suicide planes came in low and aimed straight for the ship, Willie Dee's gunners fired furiously, trying to down the plane before it struck them.

This time their training paid off and the crew rejoiced when the plane went down well short of the ship and didn't explode. Maybe, some thought, Willie Dee's luck was finally beginning to change. They were wrong.

The Japanese plane had been moving so fast that even after it went into the water it continued to move toward the ship. It kept moving until it was right under *William D. Porter* and exploded with enough force to lift the destroyer right out of the water.

The ship with the short, troubled history held on for three hours, long enough for every man on board to be rescued. Willie Dee then slipped beneath the waves, hardly to be mentioned again, its niche in history kept secret until the *Iowa* incident was officially reported in 1958. □

*Gregory A. Freeman is the author of Sailors to the End: The Deadly Fire on the USS Forrestal and the Heroes Who Fought It. For further reading, see Blood on the Sea: American Destroyers Lost in World War II, by Robert Sinclair Parkin.*