

Abandon Ship

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The clear notes of the bugle sounding chow call came over the loudspeakers throughout the ship. I stood waiting in the mess line, formed topside on the main deck aft. The last rays of the sun caught the signal flags flying — gave them a brilliant cast of red, green and yellow. The new cruiser rolled in the huge swells, leaving a foaming white trail behind her.

The men stood silently gazing at the horizon. The ship gave a slight shudder each time one of the swells crashed into her.

The sharp clanging of the ship's general-alarm bell, followed by the shrill call of the bugle, broke the silence. "All hands, man your battle stations!" blared from the loud speaker.

It was quite dark now — no lights anywhere. I pushed my way through the milling bodies everywhere, found a ladder, clambered up. Running forward on the "Com" deck, I slid on the wet metal, finally found the door that I wanted, jerked the latch, went in. As the door banged shut behind me, the dull, red glow of the night-lights came on. A sailor carrying his shoes ran by me. I ran up the ladder two steps at a time; I met the other two guys assigned to my G. Q. station. We went inside and put the ship's service phones on.

"What's the matter, anyway," I asked.

"The task group commander ordered G. Q. planes reported coming in from the north — around thirty of them. I wish that I hadn't missed chow," came through the earphones.

One of the other guys gave a continu-

ous report on the planes—speed, direction, and confirmed the number. My eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. There was a luminous glow from the instruments in the compartment.

The ship quivered; there came the crash of the five inch mounts. The flash lighted our faces for an instant. Then another crash, and then they were continuous. Forty-millimeter and twenty-millimeter tracers streaked up and arched away. Huge black shadows of torpedo bombers slid by, motors cut, close overhead. A destroyer on our port side sent up a stream of tracers. The pungent smoke of gunpowder filled the air.

Suddenly the night was turned into a dazzling white as flares, dropped by a plane, lighted. The fire became concentrated on the starboard side. A plane flared and plunged into the water by the side of the ship. It floated — still burning. Two men climbed out. A twenty opened up, and then the men fell in the water.

An explosion seemed to force the very bulkheads in. I fell to the deck — ears ringing. The ship stopped dead still, then slowly began listing unnaturally to starboard. I felt bruised all over. The guns were silent. The deck was slopping nineteen degrees by the indicator. On the phone came the report, "All hands are lost in starboard engine room and fire room. The deck plates are buckling." We waited for what we knew was coming.

Over the loudspeaker came the order, "Abandon ship."