

LOMPOC LEGACY

Lompoc Valley Historical Society, Inc.

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2 Letters Home from the destroyers wreck at Honda 90 Years Ago

We have in our Historical Society files copies of two letters written to their mothers by sailors from two ships involved in the wrecks that occurred September 8, 1923 – 90 years ago. One Destroyer, the S. P. Lee crashed on the rocks along with six others that fateful night at Honda. The other Destroyer, the U.S.S. Farragut was able to back out of the wrecks all around it and was saved from the tragedy that was unfolding in the fog that night.

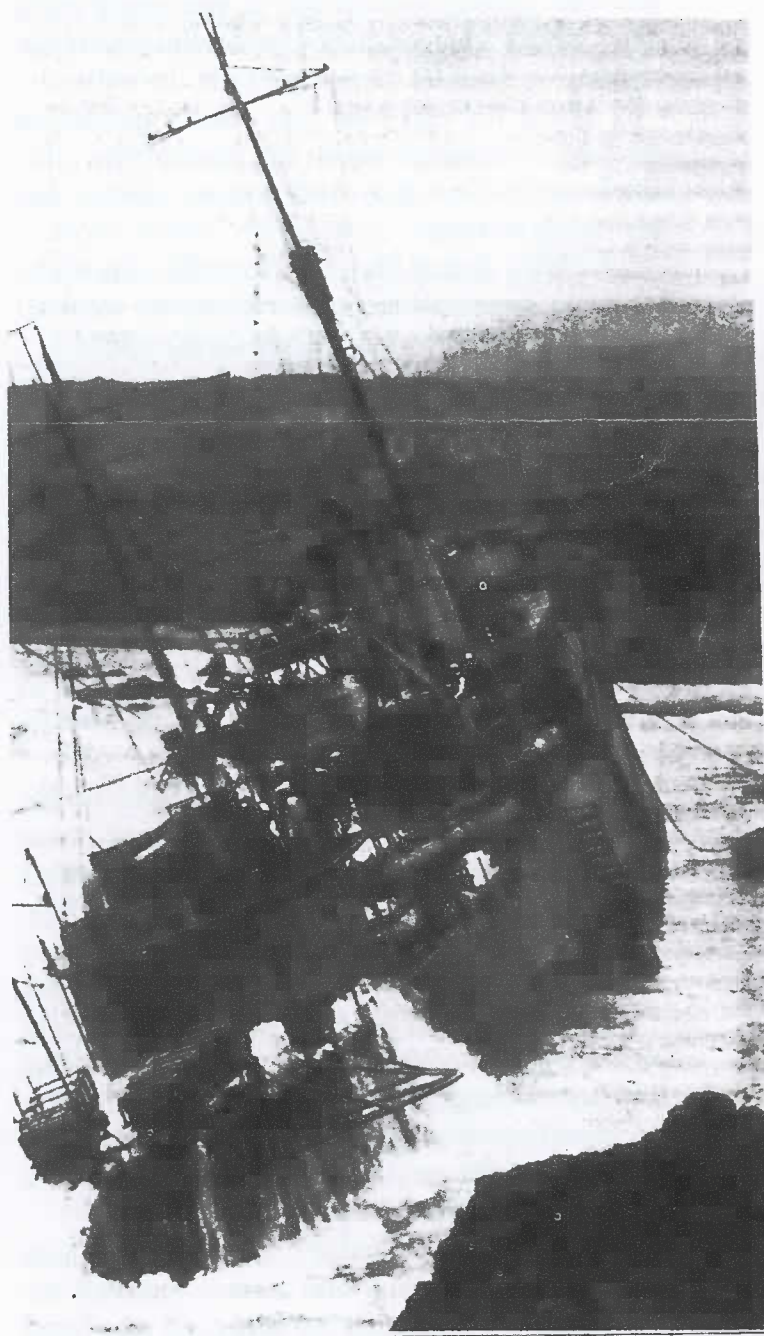
*From the San Diego Hotel
September 21, 1923*

Dearest Mother –

I arrived here yesterday from Honda and was plenty glad to get away from there because it is the dirtiest place I have ever seen.

On Saturday night the eighth the 11th squadron composed of 18 destroyers was steaming down the coast in heavy fog. We were in a column of ships sailing in a single file stretched out in one long line, the S. P. Lee being second in the column. By some trick of fate we were miles off our reckoning. I am not sure why – a court of inquiry is trying to dope that out now.

About 9 o'clock I was in my state room preparing to go to bed. I heard our engines reverse and our sirens scream so I threw on my coat and grabbed my life preservers. Before I could get out of my room I felt us hit. We slid past the first rock we hit but before I could get top side we had crashed again. When I reached the main deck we were keeling over to port and the stern was sinking. I ran to the fire room



which was fast filling and we got the word to secure.

All lights were out as the first hole we got was right at the generator. The ship was listed over about 30 degrees and it was impossible to launch a boat on the high side and equally impossible on the lower side account of the terrible surf. The seas were breaking all the way across the ship and one had to watch himself to keep from being washed overboard.

Pretty soon the Captain gave the word to abandon ship. The executive officer told me to get a line over to the beach which was only about fifty feet away. The "beach" was a precipitous cliff about a hundred feet high. The sea was running so high that no one could swim over without being dashed to death against the rocks.

I got a life raft over and finally got a line secured to some rocks on the base of the cliff. In the meantime they had gotten another one across up forward.

We then ferried the men from the ship to the rocks in the two life rafts. When we were all ashore it took us an hour to get up the cliff.

When we got up we heard the cries of the men on the Delphy, the leading ship, which was broken in two. We worked till about 2 o'clock getting men off her and the Young which had turned over. The Young had ripped her starboard side open and had capsized in about 80 seconds. All her survivors were standing on the side of the ship which was barely sticking up above the water. They got ashore by a line to the Chauncey and another line (*ed. Note: with the Chauncey crew*) to the beach.

At dawn we saw there were three more on the rocks. Two of them were against a rock about two hundred yards from the beach and another was just off the port bow of the S. P. Lee. Those by the rock had gotten on the rock and stayed all night and the men on the Nicholas (just off the bow of the Lee) had spent the night in the rigging. We got them ashore by a line Sunday morning.

Twenty-three men were lost - three from the Delphy and the rest from the Young. About a hundred were slightly injured.

At 4:30 p.m. Sunday the survivors less another officer, myself and sixteen men left for San Diego. We guarded the ships and recovered bodies. A salvaging party arrived about three or

four days later and went to work but our continued.

I did not take off the wet clothes I^e ashore in for 60 hours and did not sleep than two hours out of the twenty-four for days. Amazingly, I felt fine. The worst thing about the wreck was the oil. The fuel oil tanks were broken and everything was a sea of oil.

One poor fellow on the Delphy was knocked down when she hit, breaking both his legs. He jumped over the side and was blinded by the oil. (*ed. Note: Pieces of his broken glasses were in his eyes*). When they fished him back aboard he was a raving maniac. They could not take him across the slender line to the shore as he fought every one who came near him. Finally they lashed him aboard so they could come back and get him in the morning. In the morning the Delphy with her lone maniac crew was in the cradle of the deep.

We had recovered 13 bodies before I left and I got so used to handling gruesome, bloated, mangled and half eaten away corpses that I could be an undertaker without the slightest sensation.

We are all attached to the base now and will probably start putting new destroyers in commission. Pretty near all of us are witnesses at the court of inquiry, so there isn't much to do except wait around.

I got one letter from you and the note from the bank but the rest is up at Honda and I will probably get it in a few days.

I recovered most of my stuff but lost a good deal of that. I will get the money for it eventually, I suppose.

With worlds of love to all.

Devotedly
Will D. Wright

P.S.

I wired you the night of the wreck but in the large volume of traffic it was lost.

*he U.S.S. Farragut
y Night (Sept. 9, 1923)
a en route to San Diego*

ar Mother,

I have just been through the greatest disaster that has ever happened in the United States Navy. No doubt before this letter arrives you will have read about it in the papers, but I know the wire which I am sending tomorrow will have eased your mind as to my safety.

We left San Francisco Saturday morning and had maneuvers all day and about 4 p.m. all the ships formed in column for the rest of the night. We were supposed to get into San Diego this morning. It had been foggy all day and about 6 p.m. it got worse until 1500 yards was the extent of visibility for lights and sometimes even less.

I turned in about 8:30 p.m. as I was to stand the mid watch (12 to 4 a.m.). I did not go to sleep for about 20 minutes as the ship was rolling and pitching so that it took some time to wedge myself in my bunk with pillows. At 9:09 I heard one blast on the siren which is the signal for collision. This was followed by three blasts of the whistle which is the signal for full speed astern. I jumped out of my bunk, grabbed my trousers and a sweat shirt and put them on over my pajamas, slipped on an old pair of shoes, grabbed my flashlight, closed two ports on my way topside and I do not believe it took me over 20 seconds.

When I got topside I saw the most ghastly spectacle I ever hope to see – dead ahead of us not over 100 yards away was a destroyer sinking – she was heeled over on her side, afire, and oil burning on the water all around her. That was not so bad as the terrible, unearthly cries and moans of the men in the water swimming in the burning oil and being burned to death. Men calling for help all around in voices that will haunt me to my dying day. Searchlights were turned on by some ships and all around us we could see destroyers high and dry upon the rocks – some listing badly soon to be overturned by heavy breakers. The Captain thought he saw a boat on the beam and hailed it to come along side and be picked up – much to our horror we realized it was rocks and we were being set upon them.

We started to back and then came a sickening thud – we were aground! Full speed ahead was given and much to our joy a large swell came along and lifted us off. We backed full speed and bang – we were rammed in the stern by another destroyer. Now imagine we were rammed twice and were on the rocks once! The rock had torn a hole in the bottom. The collision mat was quickly put over the side – all hands were ordered to stand by to abandon ship. As luck, again, would have it the collision mat was accurately placed and only a comparatively small amount of water was entering the ship – the pumps were handling it nicely. We continued backing until soundings gave 12 fathoms.

We let go the starboard anchor and were lowering boats to go to the aid of the sinking ships when rocks were again sighted close aboard. The Captain told me to let the anchor slip – meaning to cut the stopper in the chain and let everything go. It would take too long to heave in on it. Well we did but at about 100 fathoms of chain it got fouled in the chain locker so we had to back full and drag the chain and anchor. Finally we stopped, hauled in on the chain – changed course to due west out to 22 fathoms and anchored about 2 miles off shore.

Just then the engineer officer came up on the bridge and said everything was salted – meaning the fresh water supply for the boilers had salt water leaks in it making it unfit for use – also that water was in some of the oil tanks. It looked for a while that we would be lying dead in the water. You realize that with no steam your lights, power, and everything – even radio – goes on the blink. Finally a reserve tank was found to be in good condition and we tided over what might have proven a serious affair for us.

Naturally we were getting calls for help but we were almost helpless ourselves and we could not go to their assistance. The latest report as to loss of life was 27 men. No officers are reported missing. (*Ed. Note: 23 men lost their lives. Four men from the Young were on a life raft and came ashore at Point Arguello after the first count.*)

There are a million details I could go into but I am hardly normal yet and will have to tell you about them later. Do not worry about me as I am feeling fine.

Some one will surely get "hung" for this awful calamity and I suppose it will be Captain Watson of the 11th squadron. There were three divisions of destroyers (the 11th squadron) all in a column. The squadron leader was first in line the Delphy was his ship - then came the 33rd division (4 of them) all which went on the rocks. We came directly after them (the 31st division and as we are the division flagship (i.e. the Farragut) we were first ship astern of the ill-

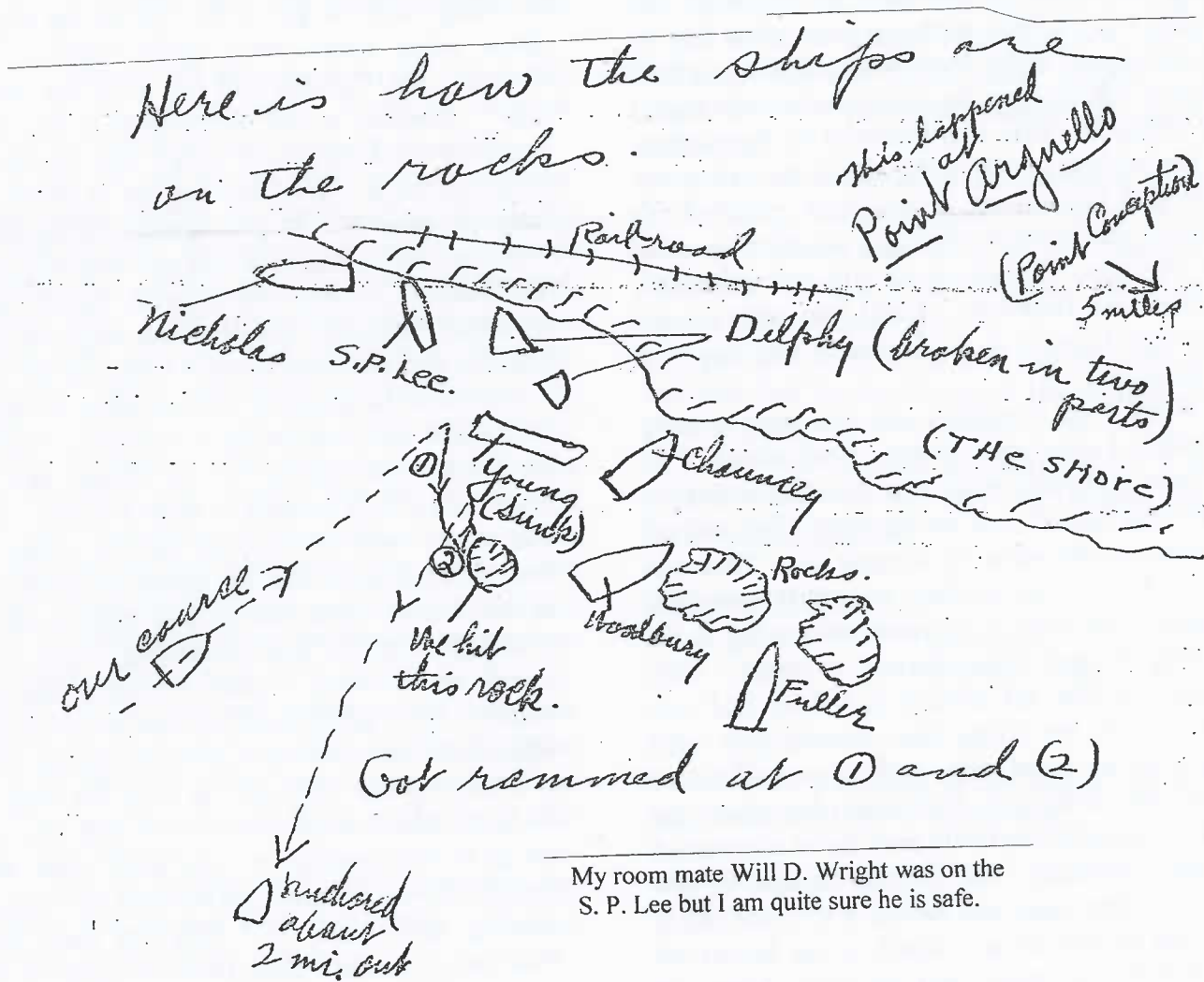
fated 33rd division. So you can see how lucky we were when the five ships directly ahead all hit the beach and two astern of us in our division (The Chauncey and Fuller) both hit the beach.

The Delphy was going at 20 knots when she hit and that probably accounts for her being broken in two. She lost 3 men while the Young lost 24 (20) according to the best information obtainable at present. Must close now and go to bed. Will write later.

Love to all

Tom

(Ed. Note: "Tom" is not identified completely in the letter)



My room mate Will D. Wright was on the S. P. Lee but I am quite sure he is safe.