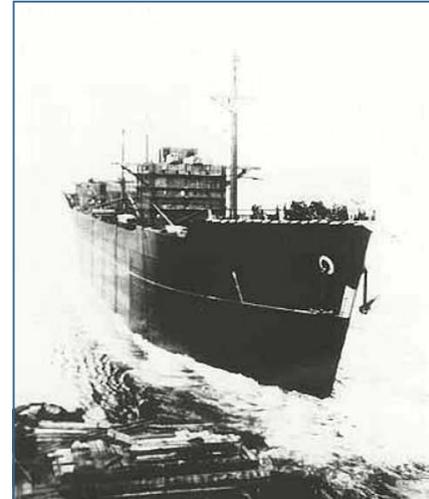


**ACTIVITY:** Sea disaster  
**CASE:** GSAF 1944.10.24  
**DATE:** Tuesday October 24, 1944  
**LOCATION:** The Bashi Straits of the South China Sea  
20°41'N, 118°17'E

**SHIP:** *Arisan Maru*

**NARRATIVE:** It was World War II. The Philippines had been lost to the Japanese in 1942, resulting in unimaginable hardships for American prisoners of war. As the war progressed, the Allied advance in the Pacific was strengthening. The Japanese knew what was coming, and so they decided to move the prisoners of war — the survivors of Bataan and Corregidor — from the Philippines to Japan for use as slave labor.



June 5, 1944, the *Arisan Maru* at Mitsui Shipyard in Japan

In late September 1944, POWs were assembled at the prison for transport to Japan. Approximately 1,800 American POWs and 100 civilians were placed in cargo holds of the 6,886-ton freighter, *Arisan Maru*, one of Imperial Japan's infamous II Hell ships. The ship departed Manila on October 10, 1944 and anchored off Palawan Island until October 20, 1944 when it returned to Manila to join Convoy MATA-30.

The conditions on board the Hell ship were appalling. Avery E. Wilbur, a survivor from the *Arisan Maru*, described his experience for United Press, which was later reprinted in the *Wheeling News-Register* on February 16, 1945:

Each prisoner was fed about one teacup of cooked rice twice daily and given a canteen full of dirty water once a day. Sanitary facilities consisted of four 5-gallon buckets which were grossly inadequate. Scores of men were afflicted with dysentery and other sickness. The heat was stifling, the stench unbearable . . . Hundreds went out of their minds. There was room to lie down for only a few. Most of the prisoners stood or squatted on the floor, hour after hour for fourteen days.

Another survivor, Robert S. Overbeck, told his story to the Associated Press, which was later printed in the *Logan Banner* on February 17, 1945:

The men were crammed into an area 9 feet high, 50 feet wide, and 90 feet long, divided into three tiers each 3 feet high, Overbeck said. They couldn't even sit erect . . . The heat was almost unbearable with the sides of the ship 'so hot nobody could touch them as they lay naked. . . ' Jap machine guns were trained on a tiny entrance to the hold so small only one man could pass through at a time . . . Only ten men who cooked rice for them were allowed on deck. They got only about two handfuls of rice a day and had so little 'dirty water' to drink they couldn't eat that. It was almost dark in their hold.

Calvin Graef also survived. Today he is legally blind and crippled, conditions doctors have told him can be traced to the near starvation he went through for more than three years in a Japanese POW camp in the Philippines before boarding the *Arisan Maru*. Graef clearly recalls the horrors he witnessed. By the time he and the others were herded onto the ship,

he said, they realized their chances of survival were even worse than in the notorious POW caps they had just left. Prisoners called the vessels hell ships for obvious reasons. Hundreds of them were packed into below-deck areas meant to accommodate only 150 Japanese soldiers, said Graef, who weighed just 98 pounds at the end of the ordeal. He and Don Meyer, another survivor, said 1,000 men on the ship were kept in one "hole", the other 800 were in the second. They could sit or stand up, but couldn't lie down. Many boarded the ship already suffering from malaria, dysentery or, like Graef, from beriberi. "It was horrible," said Meyer. "There was a lot of screaming, some were going half-mad," delirious from lack of water. Prisoners were fed one cup of rice and given one cup of water daily. No sanitary facilities existed. The holds were a toilet, and the prisoners wallowed in filth. The tropical heat rose to a suffocating 120 degrees during the day and was made even worse because the hole's hatch covers were kept partially closed to prevent escape. "We had them dying in the hole, just one right after another," Graef said. "They wouldn't let us bury our dead for the first five days of the journey."



On October 23<sup>rd</sup>, when the convoy was about 200 miles northwest of Luzon, two packs of U.S. submarines (total of nine submarines) attacked the convoy. The *Arisan Maru* carried no markings or flag indicating that it was carrying Allied prisoners. The Americans had no way of recognizing the *Arisan Maru* as a prison ship.

About 17h30 on October 24, 1944 the hell ship was hit by three torpedoes fired from an American submarine (either the *USS Shark* or the *USS Snook*). The *Arisan Maru* was hit aft of midships causing the ship to split open with the rear section sinking downward into the sea. A torpedo is thought to have hit in number three hold where Japanese troops and civilians were located. Graef was working in the ship's galley and actually saw one of the torpedoes barreling toward the *Arisan Maru*. "The sharks in that part of the ocean got very well fed that day," he recalls.

The Japanese evacuated the ship and were picked up by their destroyer escorts. Before

leaving, the Japanese guards cut rope ladders into the prisoner holds but these were restored by the prisoners and the survivors agree that almost all prisoners were able to get off the ship. Many scavenged whatever food and water they could before leaving the ship. At first, many prisoners swam toward the Japanese destroyers hoping for rescue, but they were pushed and beaten away with poles. The men climbed on whatever wreckage they could find to stay afloat for rescue.

The ship broke in two pieces which remained afloat for about two hours. Most of the POWs perished. There is a question regarding the number of survivors. The documented number is eight, five of whom, naked and emaciated, managed to find their way to freedom in China. A few other men were spotted floating at a distance but sea conditions did not allow them to get close enough to be picked up.

“One ship, one sinking, and almost as many Americans dead as U.S. combat deaths in Iraq.”

**SOURCES:** Multiple internet sources, including Chad N. Proudfoot, *Hell Ships of World War II*, <http://www.wvculture.org/HiStory/wvmemory/vets/hellships.html>