

ACTIVITY: World War II

CASE: **GSAF 1943.11.11**

DATE: Thursday November 11, 1943

LOCATION: The incident took place in the Pacific Ocean approximately 300 miles southeast of Fiji

22°08'S, 178°06'W

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: The weather was clear. The sun had not quite risen, but it was described as light out.

SEA CONDITIONS: The seas were slightly choppy with a few whitecaps.

TIME: 05h30



SS Cape San Juan listing and down by the head on 12 November 1943. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Naval Historical Center, www.history.navy.mil. Photo # NH 39392

NARRATIVE: The 6711-ton Cape San Juan was originally a C1-B cargo freighter but modified for use as a troop transport. She was on a westerly course (270°), traveling at 14.7 knots, blacked out and executing a turn to starboard in accordance with her zig-zag plan. Although she was traveling alone from San Francisco, California to Townsville, Australia, lookouts were posted.

On board were 57 Merchant Crew, 42 Navy Armed Guard, 3 radio operators, and three units of the US Army Air Corps: 811 Officers & Enlisted Men of the 855th "All Negro" Engineers (Aviation) Battalion; 367 Officers & Enlisted Men of the 1st Fighter Control, and 162 Officers & Enlisted Men of the 253rd Ordnance (Aviation) Company. There were also 21 "permanent" army personnel (3 officers and 18 enlisted men), commanded by Major Robert A. Barth, responsible for the troops while being transported, plus 1 civilian, for a total of 1,464 souls on board.

It was just before dawn when she was torpedoed by the Japanese submarine *I-21* (Commander Hiroshi Inada). The torpedo had struck below where the troops from the 855th were berthed. "The ship shook and shuddered and the bow raised slightly, then settled and the vessel took on an immediate 10 degree to 15 degree list to starboard, and then settled to a 20 degree to 25 degree list within a few minutes," said a witness. The Navy Armed Guard returned fire immediately towards the area the submarine was believed to have fired from. An SOS was sent along with the message: "torpedoed, ship sinking fast". Some of the men scrambled into overloaded life boats. Engines were stopped as men were carried by wind and waves toward the stern.

The Liberty ship *Edwin T. Meredith* was the first on the scene, arriving 5.5 hours after the torpedoing. After transferring the casualties and excess survivors remaining on board the transport, she circled the ship for eight hours and picked up survivors in the water. Of the 1,429 people on board, only 448 survived. Sharks were attacking survivors as they were being rescued.

Attempts were made to tow *Cape San Juan* to port, but she sank on the following day.

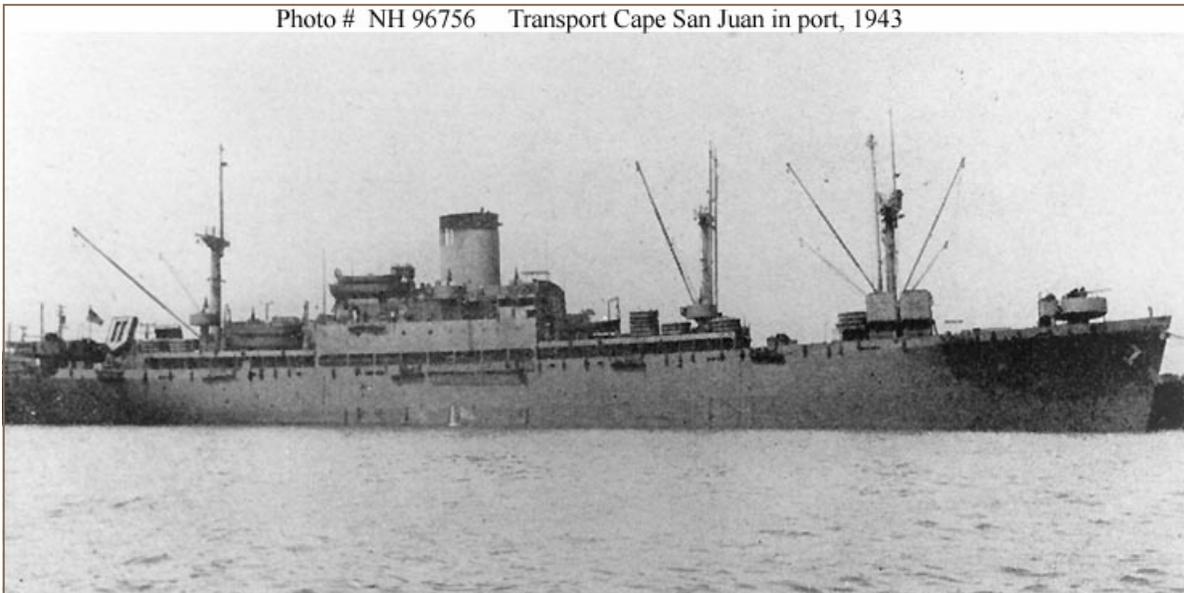
SPECIES: It is thought the attacks involved oceanic whitetip sharks.

SOURCES: Naval Historical Center; Valley Morning Star, Sunday, May 28, 1944; <http://www.ssarkansan.com/home/american-hawaiian-in-wwii/cape-san-juan#TOC-The-Attack>



Cape San Juan survivors coming ashore from YMS-241 on November 14th, 1943. Survivor in center is as yet unidentified. Officer to left staring directly at the camera is identified as Colonel George Finney, Commanding officer of the 18th General Hospital, supervising the work of bringing the survivors ashore. Photo by T/5 Salvadore Tesoriero. Photo courtesy of the Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center; Colonel Stanley Wolfe Collection. Note that it was raining at the time.

Photo # NH 96756 Transport Cape San Juan in port, 1943



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Sharks Eat Shipwrecked U. S. Troops

Transport Torpedoed In South Pacific Area

SAN FRANCISCO—(U.P.)—Schools of sharks, attracted by blood attacked exhausted survivors of the torpedoed War Shipping Administration troop transport Cape San Juan in the South Pacific and dragged them, screaming, into the water from overloaded life-rafts, eye witnesses reported Saturday.

Crew members of the S. S. Edwin T. Meredith, who saved 448 soldier-passengers during eight-hour rescue operations under night marish conditions, told their story of the Armistice day tragedy Saturday.

"I saw sharks grab two negroes from the Cape San Juan who were hanging on to life-rafts, and bite off half their bodies," said Second Engineer John Lopipara.

"There were a few bubbles and the negroes went down. They couldn't even put up a battle because they had nothing to fight with. The men we rescued were sick and almost blinded from the fuel oil on the water."

The Cape San Juan was sunk by a Japanese submarine. There were 1429 men aboard. A naval air transport seaplane rescued 48. The Meredith and a destroyer completed the rescue.

A member of the Meredith's gun crew said sailors from his ship dived from the side of the ship and swam to the bobbing, overloaded life-rafts. It was early in the morning, shortly after the Cape San Juan was hit.

"The sharks began converging on the rafts. The Cape San Juan gun crew fired into the sharks, but they couldn't scare them away.

"Survivors of the Cape San Juan were sitting on the submerged rafts waist deep in the water. Their eyes were blinded by oil, and they were so exhausted they could scarcely sit up. That made them easy prey for the sharks.

"You couldn't see the sharks in the semi-darkness until they were about 25 yards from you.

"Time after time I heard soldiers scream as the sharks swept them off the rafts. Some times the sharks attacked survivors who were being hauled to the Meredith with life ropes.

"One soldier told me: 'I was sitting on the edge of a raft talking to my buddy in the darkness. I looked away for a moment, and when I turned back, he wasn't there anymore. A shark got him.'

Lopipara said five of the negroes died after they were taken aboard the Meredith.

"One negro had a broken leg. He had more guts during the ordeal than anyone I ever saw."

The gun crewmen said the negroes and whites alike were terrified by the sharks.

"One colored boy told me he'd stay on a South Pacific island for the next 50 years rather than risk another crossing of the ocean."

Some of the survivors were unable to keep their heads out of the water. Collapsing under the strain they simply floated off the rafts.

"I saw some of the men drift past against our fantail. We were able to get some of them. Others just disappeared.

SPORTS AFIELD

By Ted Kesting

Sharks dangerous? Phooey! Everyone knows that if you splash a little water, they'll go away. Tourists who have watched native diving boys practically shoulder aside sharks know they aren't man-eating.

But debunkers notwithstanding, zoologist and writer Horace S. Mazel, warns that sometimes the shark is a man-eater. He has for many years collected reports of shark attacks, and of these a representative score of well authenticated cases stand up under the most searching scrutiny.

During the war, harrowing tales of shark attacks on battle survivors came from the South Pacific. These accounts are so blood-curdling the recital makes your hair stand on end.

Here's a mild example, as reported by Second Engineer John Lopipara of the SS Edward T. Meredith: "I saw sharks grab two Negroes from the Cape San Juan who were hanging onto life rafts, and and bite off half their bodies. There were a few bubbles and the Negroes went down. They couldn't even put up a battle." No more dramatic or conclusive proof of the power of shark jaws can be offered.

Ship's Surgeon Lt. Comdr. John Bowers, USS Meredith, writes: "The statement that dark-colored objects are not attacked is not true, for we were covered with oil and yet attacked. Also, the men attacked were not bleeding..."

There are, it is true, grounds for belief that sharks are cowardly, easily scared and usually timid creatures, under normal circumstances. This is admitted by all who are familiar with the big fish and their habits. But evidence indicates that sharks will snap at a tasty bit of human flesh if it is available.

The Abilene Reporter-News (Abilene, TX), June 27, 1949, page 2