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Emphasis On People



**ROBERT NEAL GALLAHER** along with 1,800 other American POWs were killed when a U.S. submarine torpedoed the Japanese freighter they were aboard 66 years ago.

'He didn't have an enemy in the entire camp'

## POW Neal Gallaher: Lost life in Navy's worst disaster ever

Special To The D-U  
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October 24, 2010 marks 66 years since the worst naval disaster in U.S. history, particularly in terms of lives lost on a single ship.

As naval catastrophes go many would first think of the Pearl Harbor bombings as the worst, others may consider the sinking of the U.S.S. Indianapolis as an atrocity without equal.

However, as those who have read about or have family who were killed on this "hell ship" know, the sinking of the Japanese freighter Arisan Maru, carrying 1,800 American POWs ranks number one.

The freighter was torpedoed by a U.S. submarine. One man who lost his life was a Lawrence County native named **Robert Neal Gallaher**.

Several questions immediately come to mind. How did Mr. Gallaher end up on the Arisan Maru? What happened? Did the Americans know there were POWs on the ship? Are there any records? Many books have been written that can answer these questions thoroughly.

To pay tribute to Mr. Gallaher and the others, information from many sources has been condensed for this feature.

Neal Gallaher was born on July 14, 1915 in West

Point.

His parents were Mattie Naomi Shaffer and Robert Gillespie Gallaher. Sometime in his childhood the family moved to Lawrenceburg. Neal joined the service March 11, 1938 and was assigned as a Pharmacists Mate.

Documents provided by Mr. Jerry Gobble, great nephew to Neal, that he got from the War Records

Department provide a record of Gallaher's exemplary war service.

12-8-41: Attached to Navy Yard Dispensary, Cavite P.I. (Philippine Islands)

12-10-41: Treated and evacuated to the U.S. Naval Hospital Cabacao following the destruction of the navy yard by enemy bombs.

12-11-41: Assisted in  
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# POW: 1,800 lost their lives in Navy's worst disaster in history

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evacuating the Navy Hospital, Canasco P.I. to Sternberg General Hospital Manila P.I. and reported to that place for duty.

12-13-41: Transferred to Union College, Assisted in moving and establishing a Naval Hospital Unit at that place.

12-26-41: Transferred to Manila P.I. Assisted in establishing a Hospital Unit.

1-2-42: Interned by the Imperial Japanese Army upon the occupation of the City of Manila.

2-1-42: Promoted to Pharmacist's Mate First Class

5-9-42: Taken by the Japanese to the Pasey Prison Camp at the Pasey Elementary School.

5-30-42: Taken by the Japanese to Bilibid Prison, a Japanese Prison Camp, Manila P.I. Worked long hours under adverse conditions treating and nursing many seriously ill American and Filipino Service patients found upon arrival and assisted in establishing a hospital in the old abandoned structures within the prison without benefit of hospital equipment.

10-11-1944: Taken by the Japanese, along with a draft of 1784 prisoners, to Japan.

According to William Brewer's book "The Great Raid of Cabanatuan", hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Philippines Islands were invaded by the Japanese.

In the battles that ensued many prisoners of war were captured, some surrendered after months of fighting.

The Japanese had made provisions to take care of 10,000-20,000 POWs; they took over 80,000.

Many prisoners were kept for years. According to William Bowen, researcher

and son of Mr. William E. Bowen who died on the Arisan Maru, a draft of prisoners was assembled at Old Bilibid Prison, Manila, Philippines starting in late September 1944 for transport to Japan to work as forced labor.

The Japanese knew the Allies were coming back to retake the Philippines and it is believed they were moving as many POWs out as possible.

This information coincides with other written works. It was noted by another prisoner from Bilibid that the prison was boring because they were not sent out on work details as they were being processed to be "shipped out". It also ties up with Gallaher's war record. It appears that Gallaher was caring for these many sick and wounded POWs.

Bowen writes "Approximately 1,800 prisoners boarded the Arisan Maru. They left Manila on the 20th of October 1944 (after initially leaving on the 11th and coming back) in a convoy around midnight and headed for Formosa. The 6886 ton Arisan Maru was sunk in the Bashi Straits, South China Sea on October 24, 1944 at about 5 PM. Naval records indicate that the USS Shark II (SS314) attacked a Japanese freighter in the late afternoon on this day.

The USS Shark was lost with all 87 hands in that same action and is believed to have torpedoed the Arisan. The Arisan carried no markings or flag indicating that it was carrying Allied prisoners. The Americans had no way of recognizing the Arisan as a prison ship. It was hit aft of midships causing the ship to split open with the rear section sinking downward into

the sea. " Naval records for the USS Snook indicate they too engaged the Arisan Maru. They claim sinking this cargo ship during their 7th war patrol. Research indicates that carrying POWs in unmarked ships was common and bombing them was also common. Many POWs were lost in this way.

Conflicting reports surround what happened after the sinking.

Most reports agree that although the Japanese guards cut the rope ladders into the prisoner holds, these were restored and almost all the prisoners were able to get off the ship.

However, they were not rescued by the Japanese destroyers that saved the Japanese on board the ship.

The POWs were beaten back by sticks and not allowed to board so they climbed on whatever wreckage they could find to stay afloat.

Nine initially survived. According to Bowen and other reports, five were saved by a Chinese boat captain. These five made it back to the United States. Four other men survived but were picked up by Japanese ships and returned to Japanese control. One of these four ultimately died.

What else can be found in records about the service of PhM1c Neal Gallaher?

In a letter from the Navy Department, Bureau of Naval Personnel, dated December 8, 1942 it was noted that Gallaher was being carried in the status of "missing." In this letter they state "The Navy Department is mindful of the anxiety suffered by relatives of men whose fate remains undetermined. Although concerted effort is made to locate the missing personnel, several months may elapse before the fate

of Gallaher can be determined."

A 1945 letter from the bureau indicates that correspondence had taken place between PhM1c Gallaher and his parents while he was a POW. Letters from 1946 indicate that Gallaher was able to generate correspondence from the POW camp to increase the amount of his life insurance policy. It appears that he did not expect to live.

VA files also indicate that two others were in the prison camp with Gallaher. *The Democrat-Union* dated Friday, November 30, 1945 reveals that Mr. and Mrs. Gallaher spoke with Thomas Harrell and Preston Hubbard, the two POWs, about their son. Harrell said "Neal divided his extra food with me while all of us were getting too little and I feel as if I owe him my privilege

of being here now." Hubbard added the following comment "He didn't have an enemy in the entire camp".

In their letter to the Gallaher family the Navy Department wrote "It has been ascertained that on October 11, 1944, your son, who had been held captive by the Japanese in the Billibid Prisoner of War Camp was placed on board a Japanese freighter, apparently en route to Japan.

The ship, which bore no mark to indicate it was carrying prisoners of war, was torpedoed and sunk off Shonan Eastern Coast of China on October 24, 1944.

Records maintained by the Japanese authorities in the Philippine Islands have come into possession of United States Naval personnel and reveal that your son did not survive the sinking

...The Navy Department shares in your loss and extends sincere sympathy to you in your sorrow. It is hoped that you may find comfort in the knowledge that your son gave his life for his country, upholding the highest traditions of the Navy."

Lawrence County veterans have a history of serving their country well. Many of them paid the ultimate price and left families and friends to mourn their loss. The men lost in battle are recognized on a plaque in the Lawrence County Administrative Building and at the Lawrence County War Monument in Loretto. Condolences go to Mr. Jerry Gobble the great nephew of Robert Neal Gallaher. He was the force behind this story. We thank him for his contribution and devotion.