

## **EXAMPLE SHORT HISTORICAL STORY BASED ON RESEARCH**

**Prompt:** Write an interesting historical story about a famous event that really happened. Show the challenges that were faced and how they were resolved. Make sure that the story contains at least five paragraphs and all the elements of a story. Provide at least three footnotes and a reference list. Use the MLA style.

TITLE OF THE STORY: The Torpedo that Almost Killed a President

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### The Torpedo that Almost Killed a President

Of all the crewmen on the American destroyer William D. Porter, only Captain Wilfrid Walker knew the reason why he had ordered absolute radio silence. His ship was one of the three destroyers guarding the USS battleship *Iowa* as it carried President Franklin Delano Roosevelt across the Atlantic Ocean during World War II.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, they were taking the president and his team to a port in Morocco. From there, the American team would continue by land to a conference in Iran with the leaders of Britain and the Soviet Union. Normally, the ships used radio to communicate important information to each other. However, any radio activity could have been detected by German submarines along the route. Certainly, one might ask why hadn't the president used an airplane to shorten the trip? That plan had been considered too risky because of possible attacks by the German air force. Wouldn't a submarine be safer than a battleship? That might be true, but a submarine could not comfortably accommodate the president in his wheelchair, along with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other top-level personnel required for the mission.

As a result of these considerations, on Nov. 12, 1943, the warships had set sail from the mouth of the Potomac River, near Washington, D.C. with the president on board. Two days later, the group was east of Bermuda when the President asked the captain of the U.S. Battleship *Iowa* to test the battleship's defenses in case they came under an air attack. The crew of the *Iowa* sent

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<sup>1</sup> Porter, 2003, p. 1

up weather balloons to be practice targets for their anti-aircraft guns. Seeing this activity on the *Iowa*, the captain of the destroyer *William D. Porter* (nicknamed the *Willie Dee*) sent his men to their battle stations to take part in the drill. They started shooting at any balloons that were missed by the gunners on the battleship. Coincidentally, the torpedo crew on the *Willie Dee* was also preparing to take pretend shots at the *Iowa*, which was 6,000 yards—a little over 3 miles—away. They had planned that no torpedo would actually be launched because the primers would all be removed ahead of the practice activity. To clarify, the primer is the device that explodes to push the torpedo out of the ship into the water.<sup>2</sup> Little did anyone know that someone forgot to remove the primer from Torpedo Mount Number 3.<sup>3</sup>

On the bridge of the *Willie Dee*, the torpedo officer ordered a simulated firing. "Fire 1...., Fire 2..." Of course, nothing was supposed to happen and nothing did. Then he said, "Fire 3...." When the sailors saw a live torpedo heading away from their ship toward the *Iowa*, their faces turned white. Naturally, the next four minutes aboard the destroyer were insane. The captain knew that he could not break radio silence and disobey an order, so he tried another way to warn the *Iowa* that a torpedo was coming. The crew tried a flashing light warning about the torpedo, but by mistake the message said that the torpedo was headed in another direction. Then they signaled that their destroyer was going reverse at full speed, another message that made no sense! Finally, Captain Walker decided he had to break radio silence. The crew radioed the code "Lion, Lion, come right." (*Lion* was the code name for the battleship.)

Hearing this message, the radio man on the *Iowa*, who was clueless about the emergency, requested that the calling station identify itself first. Precious seconds ticked by as the *Willie Dee* radio man identified his ship. Subsequently, the identifying message was received, and the *Iowa*

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<sup>2</sup> "Torpedo," 2018, p. 1

<sup>3</sup> Bonner, 1994, p. 1

began an abrupt turn to avoid the speeding torpedo. When President Roosevelt heard that a torpedo was headed for his ship, he asked to be moved with his wheelchair over to the railing so that he could see it. Fortunately, the torpedo zoomed past the battleship and finally detonated behind the stern as it struck the heavy waves in the wake of the *Iowa*. The entire incident lasted about 4 minutes from torpedo firing at 14:36 to detonation at 14:40.<sup>4</sup> (The Navy uses a 24-hour clock, and so these times signified 2:36 p.m. to 2:40 p.m.)

After the incident, Captain Walker confessed that the mistaken torpedo shot came from his destroyer. Naturally, he was in big trouble. This event was an enormous scandal and an embarrassment for the Navy. The entire crew was placed under arrest and sent to Bermuda to face trial. This was the first time in U.S. Naval history that an entire crew of a ship had been arrested. Justifiably, the crew member who forgot to remove the primer device got the worst punishment. He was sentenced to 14 years of hard labor. In addition, the rest of the crew's military careers were to be ended. However, President Roosevelt asked that no punishments be levied on the crew. He understood that the incident had been caused by a series of accidents. Moreover, Captain Walker was not punished for breaking radio silence. The president was grateful that the captain had chosen to save the president's life versus follow an order. After all, the order was made to protect the president's life, and it could have resulted in him being killed along with many others. Some orders just have to be disobeyed, and this was one of them!

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<sup>4</sup> "USS William," 1943, p. 1

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