A CLASSIC LETTER

The late Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz left a heritage to the United States Navy which will contribute materially to its finest traditions. A part of this heritage that is particularly dear to the heart of Davy Jones is Admiral Nimitz' classic letter to the Pacific Fleet after the disastrous typhoon off Luzon in December 1944. In fact, one of Davy's guiding principles is contained in the closing lines of that letter -- "Nothing is more dangerous than for a seaman to be grudging in taking precautions lest they turn out to have been unnecessary."

Most senior officers are familiar with this letter, and with the damage suffered and lessons learned from the Luzon disaster, but many junior officers are not. With the typhoon-hurricane season not far away, Davy considers it appropriate once again to reprint the letter. This is done not only as a tribute to a great Naval officer, but also to remove any complacency which today's seafarers may have developed towards the elements and to convey to them the valuable lessons the letter contains.

13 February 1945

From: Commander in Chief, U. S. Pacific Fleet
To: Pacific Fleet and Naval Shore Activities, Pacific Ocean Areas

Subj: Damage in Typhoon; Lessons of

1. On 18 December 1944, vessels of the Pacific Fleet, operating in support of the invasion of the Philippines in an area about 300 miles east of Luzon, were caught near the center of a typhoon of extreme violence. Three destroyers, the HULL, MONAGHAN, and SPENCE, capsized and went down with practically all hands, serious damage was sustained by the CL MIAMI, the CVL's MONTEREY, COWPENS, and SAN JACINTO, the CVE's CAPE ESPERANCE and ALTAMAHA, and the DD's AYLWIN, DEWEY, and HICKOX. Lesser damage was sustained by at least 19 other vessels, from CA's down to DE's. Fires occurred on three carriers when planes were smashed in their hangars; and some 146 planes on various ships were lost or damaged beyond economical repair by the fires by being smashed up, or by being swept overboard. About 790 officers and men were lost or killed, and 80 were injured. Several surviving destroyers reported rolling 70° or more; and we can only surmise how close this was to capsizing completely for some of them. It was the greatest loss that we have taken in the Pacific without compensatory return since the First Battle of Savo.

2. In the light of hindsight it is easy to see how any of several measures might have prevented this catastrophe, but it was far less easy a problem at the time for the men were were out there under the heaviest of conflicting responsibilities. The important thing is for it never to happen again; and hence, while it is impracticable herein to go into all the factors involved and the experiences undergone, some of the outstanding lessons will be discussed.

3. Possibly, too much reliance was placed on the analysis broadcast from the Fleet Weather Central, Pearl Harbor. Weather data were lacking from an area some 240 to 300 miles in diameter (where the storm was actually centered); and the immediate signs of it in the operating area were not heeded early enough. Groups of the Third Fleet tried to avoid the storm center, but neither radically enough nor to best advantage, since their information as to its location and path was meager. Fleet damage and losses were accentuated by the efforts of vessels and subordinate commanders to maintain fleet courses, speeds and formations during the storm. Commanding officers failed to realize sufficiently in advance of the fact that it was necessary for them to give up the attempt, and give all their attention to saving their ships. There was a lack of appreciation by subordinate commanders and commanding