

“Shipwreck”

There was only one reef in that immediate area and the Irimi Stefanou hit it. And in daylight, too.

--William Miller, ship salvage master, February 8, 1965.

On a glassy sea under a clear sky, the Greek freighter SS *Irimi Stefanou* steamed south in early February 1965. Carrying a heavy load of Canadian lumber, the former World War II Liberty ship was destined for London, via the Panama Canal. But its passage would end abruptly on the rocks of the San Benito Islands, 300 miles south of San Diego.

On February 6, a team of San Diego salvagers, summoned by radio distress messages, arrived to discover a strange scene. The *Irimi Stefanou* was hard aground on a beach on the southeast side of East San Benito Island. Inspecting the wreck, Salvage Master William Miller found about 25 feet of water in the forward holds and the engine room flooded.

Captain Andrea Polemis seemed reluctant to tell Miller what had happened aboard the freighter, and most of the crew was absent from the ship. “It’s quite a mystery to us, said Captain J. S. Parry, a ship surveyor for Lloyds of London, which insured the stricken vessel. The mystery was about to grow.

Captain Polemis told Miller that he was steaming south when he saw a peak from San Benito on his bow. “There was a low mist obscuring the rest of the island,” he said. Then his ship struck a reef. Worried that the freighter would sink, along with its \$800,000 cargo of lumber, the captain deliberately beached his 450-foot ship on the island.

Forty minutes after the beaching, most of the Greek crewmen had abandoned ship. Carrying provisions and guns, the sailors fled the wreck and set up camp a few hundred yards from the ship.

Miller’s salvage divers inspected the hull and found a 75-foot gash in her starboard side. But Miller was confident that temporary repairs would make the ship seaworthy. Barges were ordered from Long Beach to remove the cargo and lighten the ship. It would then be towed to San Diego.

Meanwhile, sixteen Greek sailors defied their captain’s orders and refused to return to the *Irimi Stefanou*. Flying a shipwreck flag atop the island, they fired distress flares each night to attract other ships. The captain and a few other officers remained aboard the beached freighter.

As salvage crews began unloading cargo onto barges, the sailors maintained their self-imposed exile. “The crewmen insist that the ship is not safe and are demanding to be returned to Greece,” reported Ernie Judd, president of the Pacific Towboat and Salvage Co. “They have threatened to damage equipment aboard the freighter. I’ve had to double the watch.”

After ten days, the mutinous seamen began firing rifle shots at the freighter. “You could hear the bullets whining,” said Miller. The Greek owners of the ship gave in. Arrangements were made for chartered amphibious planes to take the men off the island and to the United States. A commercial flight would return them to Greece.

Three of the sailors returned north on a salvager's tugboat. In a radio interview conducted at sea through an interpreter, the men denied their actions had been mutinous. They told their interviewers their captain was "very competent" and "quite familiar with the coastal area" around San Benito. The sailors said the ship had gone aground in "dense fog." No threatening shots had been fired, they claimed. "We have nothing against the captain, just the ship."

Two weeks after the wreck of the *Irini Stefanou*, three private amphibious planes landed at Lindbergh Field, carrying seventeen more rescued sailors. Among them were several officers with new stories to tell about the accident.

Stelios Houliaras, the helmsman at the time of the accident, declared the weather was clear that morning. "You could see 25 miles," he told reporters. "The sea was as smooth as this table." Radio Officer Michael Stefanou explained the wreck by adding: "He (the captain) must have misjudged the distance from the island."

But second-mate Parissos Panagiotis stunned reporters with surprising details that contradicted the captain's version of the accident. Moments after the ship struck the reef, the officer claimed he had raced to the bridge and asked Captain Polemis what happened. "He said nothing."

The captain had then ordered a sharp turn to take the ship away from the island and out to sea. Alarmed, Panagiotis advised "we should get behind the lee of the island." The captain replied, "Shut up! You're stupid."

"I told him I was taking over, Panagiotis related. "He said nothing." Panagiotis hurriedly checked the chart and found a safe cove on San Benito. "I then put her aground."

By month's end most of the officers and crew of the wrecked freighter were on their way home to Greece. It would be up to Greek shipping authorities to sort out the true story of the wreck of the *Irini Stefanou*.

Captain Polemis and his chief engineer remained with the ship as it was finally wrenched free from the beach at San Benito. The *Irini Stefanou* made its last ocean voyage at the end of a 1000-foot towline, pulled stern first to protect the huge hole in its bow. The salvagers had originally planned to take the freighter to San Diego but with no local dry docking facilities, the tow ended at San Pedro.

Repairs to the ship were estimated at \$300,000 but the *Irini Stefanou* would never return to sea. The ship was reported scrapped at Terminal Island in 1967.



Built as the *Eliza Jane Nicholson* in 1943, the ex-Liberty ship was sold to Greek shippers in 1958 and renamed the *Irini Stefanou*. From <http://www.armed-guard.com/lsip09.html>

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