

# “The Suicide Fleet”

*Davy Jones will claim for his own two famous old square-riggers, the American ships Indiana and Bohemia, in a movie thriller to be filmed off the Coronado Islands this week, both vessels being slated to sink as the last scene of a play.*

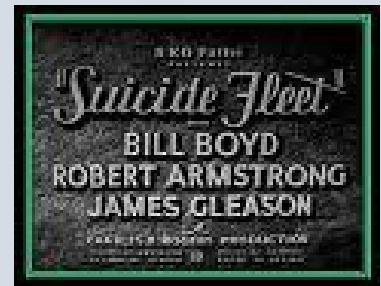
--San Diego Union, August 9, 1931

After fifty-six years of service on the high seas, the clipper ship *Bohemia* would end its days in “battle.” Immortalized on celluloid as a star of the movie “The Suicide Fleet,” the aging ship sank in deep water, twenty miles west of Coronado, torpedoed by German “U-boats.”

The *Bohemia* was among many old wooden sailing ships bought up cheaply in the 1920s to form a Hollywood fleet for use in the movies. *Bohemia* and its sister ship, the *Indiana* were discovered by producer Cecil B. DeMille as they lay anchored in San Francisco Bay in 1925. After a refitting in Long Beach, the two ships starred in an epic sea yarn, “The Yankee Clipper.” *Bohemia* later appeared in “The Blood Ship” and “The Wreck of the Hesperus.”

Built in 1875 in Bath, Maine, the three-masted *Bohemia* had begun its career in elegant fashion, carrying silk from China to the West Coast. But by the late 1890s it was carrying coal between British Columbia and San Diego. In 1897, the ship was bought by the Alaska Packers Association, a company known for its “Star” fleets of steel and iron ships, such as the *Star of India*. The *Bohemia* carried canned salmon in the Alaska trade for over two decades before its rescue by DeMille.

In August 1931, *Bohemia* and *Indiana* appeared in San Diego, scheduled to play leading roles in the RKO-Pathé production of “The Suicide Fleet,” a World War I drama of U.S. Navy men on a wooden “mystery ship” intended to outwit German submarines. The film would star William Boyd—the future “Hopalong Cassidy”—along with James Gleason, Robert Armstrong, and 20-year-old Ginger Rogers.



The Navy fully co-operated with RKO and provided ships and submarines for the production. A Navy captain, W. K. Friedell, served a technical advisor. Years later, as a Rear Admiral, Friedell would be Commandant of San Diego’s 11<sup>th</sup> Naval District.

The filming of “Suicide Fleet” began fitfully. For a battle scene set aboard *Bohemia*, pyrotechnic bombs were set off to create a small fire. But the artificial blaze “burned too well,” threatening the ship and film crew. As actors leaped over the side of the ship to escape the flames, a Navy destroyer, the USS *Noa*, came alongside and quenched the fire with its large pumps.

A few days later a mysterious explosion sank a film crew’s speedboat as headed to the *Bohemia*. The San Diego fireboat *Bill Kettner* reached the scene too late to save the boat but the ten passengers were picked up without serious injury.

But for the movie’s final scenes the destruction would be deliberate. The *Bohemia* and the *Indiana* would be filmed fighting off several German U-boats (played by disguised U.S. submarines) in a fiery battle with cannon volleys and streaking torpedoes. In the climatic moment, the *Bohemia* would be blown up in a blaze of glory.

To prepare for the closing scene, special effects “executioner” Harry Redmond packed 1,200 pounds of dynamite into the hold. Redmond divided his explosives into seven different caches, wired together and timed to go off in synchronization with broadsides from the U-boats. Redmond would set off the charges himself by pressing buttons on an electric control board.

In late afternoon on August 18, the *Bohemia* and its adversaries were positioned for the final sequence. With empty decks and a lashed helm, the old clipper ship was aimed seaward, as the U-boats and camera boats approached from the east. At the designated point, the submarines began firing from five-inch guns. The first shell passed cleanly through the hull. A second shot—intended to fly high—instead headed straight for the heavy explosives in the hold. While Redmond was still playing out cable and preparing to manually detonate his charges, the hull blew apart “like an opening flower.”

Though premature, the explosion was magnificent. With Redmond’s carefully arranged wiring blown apart by the first blast, the remaining charges exploded quickly in unsynchronized, spectacular fashion. Still, as *Union* reporter Jerry MacMullen observed, “the old ship died hard.” The crippled *Bohemia* refused to sink and kept plowing forward. The Navy submarines poured shots into her and the ship slowly settled by the stern, finally sinking as dusk fell.

The *Bohemia*’s sister ship, the *Indiana*, was towed to San Pedro to meet a similar fate with the movie script dictating “destruction by her crew to avoid capture.” But the *Bohemia* would outlast the *Indiana*: days after filming “The Suicide Fleet” ended, wreckage from the old ship began surfacing off Ensenada where it floated as a hazard to shipping for several weeks.



The *Bohemia* was “torpedoed” by a U.S. Navy submarine, dressed up as a German “U-boat.”  
Courtesy San Diego Maritime Museum.

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