



H-Gram 045: The Ship That Wouldn't Die (2)—USS Laffey (DD-724), 16 April 1945

16 April 2020

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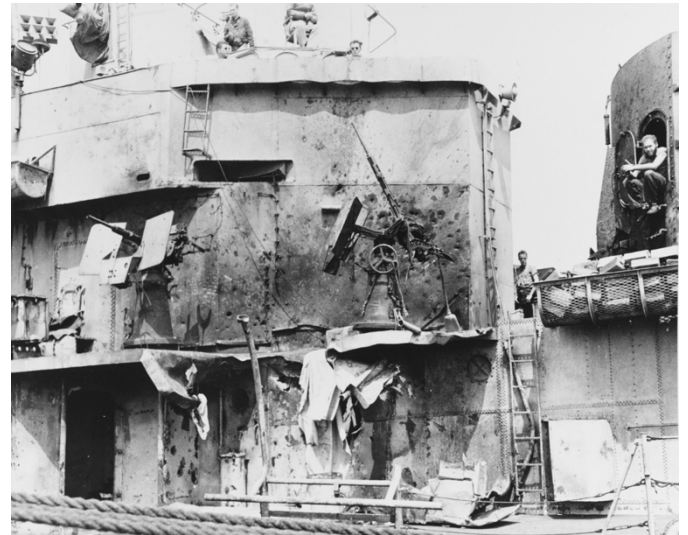
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75th Anniversary of World War II

This H-gram covers the Naval Battle of Okinawa from the second massed kamikaze attack (Kikusui No. 2) through Kikusui No. 3 and No. 4 to 2 May 1945, with special emphasis on the ordeal of USS Laffey (DD-724) on 16 April 1945. It is a follow-on to H-Gram 044. For more on the background on the invasion of Okinawa, please see H-Gram 044's attachment H-044-1.

USS Laffey (DD-724)

"No! I'll never abandon ship as long as a single gun will fire!" stated Commander Frederick J. Becton, commanding officer of destroyer Laffey as his severely damaged ship burned on 16 April 1945.



USS Laffey (DD-724), severely damaged by bombs and kamikaze hits some 30 nautical miles northwest of Okinawa, on 16 April 1945. This view shows the Group 21 20-mm guns on Laffey's starboard side, abreast of her bridge (NH 75436).

Naval Historian Samuel Eliot Morison remarked, "Probably no ship has ever survived an attack of the intensity that [Laffey] experienced." Morison was probably right.

During the 80-minute attack by 22 Japanese kamikaze aircraft and dive-bombers at Radar Picket Station No. 1 northwest of Okinawa, Laffey shot down at least eight aircraft (six in the first 12 minutes) and damaged the six kamikaze that hit her. By this time, she had been damaged by four bombs (plus those carried on the kamikaze). With both her surface search and air search radars out

of action, her aft 5-inch turret destroyed, one quad 40-mm destroyed and the other on fire, down by the stern due to a bomb hit, her rudder jammed 26 degrees over, with virtually everything after the aft stack engulfed in aviation gasoline fires from kamikaze hits, it seemed Laffey was doomed. Wounded men in the wardroom casualty aid station were killed by bomb shrapnel. But no one gave up. Gunners kept shooting despite flames all around, and damage control parties kept fighting the fires despite more bombs, strafing, and kamikaze. A number of the 20-mm gunners "died in the straps," firing their guns at the kamikaze until the instant of impact. Skillful ship handling by Becton, one of the most battle-experienced officers of the time, in maximizing firepower against incoming aircraft and maneuvering to take the unavoidable hits from the stern rather than even more damaging ones from forward was a key factor in Laffey's survival. Another critical factor was that the destroyer's firerooms and engine rooms remained watertight.

The arrival of U.S. Marine Corps F4U Corsairs of VMF-441 "Blackjacks" finally changed the odds. The Marines heroically flew into Laffey's anti-aircraft fire to down numerous Japanese aircraft. One Corsair crashed into the destroyer's air search radar while chasing and downing a Japanese fighter (the Corsair pilot lived, the Japanese pilot didn't). Despite horrific damage and high casualties (32 dead and 71—or 72—wounded), Laffey's crew not only saved their ship, but the ship still had fight in her when the Japanese attacks ended. Commander Becton would be awarded a Navy Cross, and Ensign Robert Thomsen a posthumous Navy Cross. Other crewmen would be awarded six Silver Stars, 18 Bronze Stars and one Navy Letter of Commendation. Laffey would be awarded a Presidential Unit Citation. The skipper of LCS(L)-51 (large support landing craft), Lieutenant Howell D. Chickering, whose small and damaged vessel stood loyally by Laffey and downed six aircraft of her own, was also awarded a Navy Cross.

In many respects, Laffey was lucky. Over the next two months, other U.S. Navy ships would come under attacks almost intense and many would be hit, many with even higher casualties. In some cases, crews would save ships that should have sunk, in others the ship was lost despite their crews' best efforts, often due to sheer random chance of where the kamikaze hit. One thing that is certain, however, was that the extreme valor shown by the crew of Laffey was hardly unique.

For more detail on the ordeal of Laffey, please see attachment H-045-1.



USS Sigsbee (DD-502), photographed from USS Miami (CL-89) after a kamikaze cut off her stern off Okinawa on 14 April 1945. She was towed to port and repaired (80-G-328579).

The Naval Battle of Okinawa, Part 2

Not only did U.S. ships off Okinawa face conventional and suicide aircraft attack, but a significant threat also came from Japanese submarines, some of them modified to piggy-back four to six Kaiten manned suicide torpedoes. Between the time U.S. forces arrived off Okinawa in late March 1945 to the beginning of May, the Japanese deployed two groups of Kaiten-equipped submarines, the Tartara Group (I-44, I-47, I-56, and I-58) on 28 March and the Tembu Group (I-47 and I-36) on 20 and 22 April. None of these Kaiten submarines successfully attacked targets, although I-44 and I-56 would be sunk trying.

Conventional Japanese submarines fared even worse than the Kaiten subs, with RO-41 (rammed by destroyer Haggard [DD-555]), I-8, RO-49, RO-56, and RO-109 all being sunk, accounting for almost every Japanese submarine deployed to the Okinawa area. The notorious I-8 (the submarine's crew committed numerous war crimes against Allied shipwreck survivors) put up a spirited surface gun battle with destroyer Morrison (DD-560) before going down, and the rest used every trick in the book to escape, but were no match for superior U.S. ASW technology.

Japanese kamikaze went after the Fast Carrier Task Force (TF-58) on 11 April, damaging Enterprise (CV-6) and Essex (CV-9); the destroyer Kidd (DD-661) took a severe kamikaze hit, but survived.

The second massed Japanese kamikaze attack (Kikusui No.2) involved 185 kamikaze (125 navy and 60 army aircraft) on 12 April. The destroyer Mannert L. Abele (DD-733) was the first ship to be sunk by an Ohka rocket-assisted manned suicide bomb launched from a bomber, in a massive blast with heavy loss of life (84 killed and 30 wounded). LCS(L)-33 was also sunk. Destroyer Zellars (DD-777), destroyer-minesweeper Lindsey (DM-32), and LSM-189 were put out of action for the rest of the war. Battleship Tennessee (BB-43), destroyers Purdy (DD-734) and Cassin Young (DD-793), destroyer escorts Rall (DE-304) and Whitehurst (DE-634), and LCS(L)-57 were out of action for over a month. About 270 U.S. crewmen were killed and about 430 wounded.

The kamikaze threat was near continuous and, on 14 April, destroyer Sigsbee (DD-502) was badly damaged and nearly sunk.

Kikusui No. 3 came in on 16 April and included 165 kamikaze (120 navy and 45 army aircraft) and resulted in the loss of destroyer Pringle (DD-477) with heavy casualties (65 dead and 110 wounded), and putting the destroyers Laffey (DD-724) and Bryant (DD-665), destroyer-minesweepers Hobson

(DM-26) and Harding (DM-28), and destroyer escort Bowers (DE-637) out of action for the duration of the war. Carrier Intrepid (CV-11) was also put out of action for over 30 days, leaving only five of the original 11 fleet carriers undamaged and on line (although all but Franklin [CV-13] would return). About 225 U.S. crewmen were killed and about 390 wounded.

Japanese kamikaze attacks on 22 April sank minesweeper Swallow (AM-65) and LCS(L)-15 and damaged destroyer Isherwood (DD-520).

Kikusui No. 4 came in on 27 and 28 April and included 115 kamikaze (65 navy and 50 army aircraft), and sank the ammunition ship Canada Victory. The destroyer Hutchins (DD-476) was put out of action by a Japanese one-man suicide boat and destroyer-transport Rathburne (APD-25) was hit by a kamikaze. Both were saved by their crews, but were too damaged to repair. The evacuation transport Pinkney (APH-2) and hospital ship Comfort (AH-6) were seriously damaged by kamikaze hits. U.S. casualties during Kikusui No. 4 were 77 dead and 87 wounded. Among the dead were 27 Army personnel, including six nurses and ten patients, aboard Comfort. There is some evidence to suggest that the Japanese hit on Comfort was retaliation for the sinking of the Japanese Red Cross ship Awa Maru (with the loss of all but one of over 2,000 aboard) by submarine Queenfish (SS-393), which resulted in the court-martial of the submarine's commanding officer.

On 29 April, destroyers Haggard (DD-555) and Hazelwood (DD-531) were badly damaged by kamikaze hits, and the next day the flagship of the Minesweeping Flotilla, Terror (CM-5), was put out of action.

However, the worst was not yet over for the U.S. ships off Okinawa, which will be continued in H-Gram 046. For more on the Naval Battle of Okinawa, Part 2, please see attachment H-045-2.

50th Anniversary of the Apollo 13 Mission



The original crew of the Apollo 13 lunar landing mission: (from left) Captain James A. Lovell, Jr., USN, mission commander; Lieutenant Commander Thomas A. Mattingly, Jr., USN, command module pilot (replaced by Jack L. Swigert, Jr., due to an inadvertent German measles exposure shortly before the launch); and Fred W. Haise, Jr., lunar module pilot (USN 1143249).

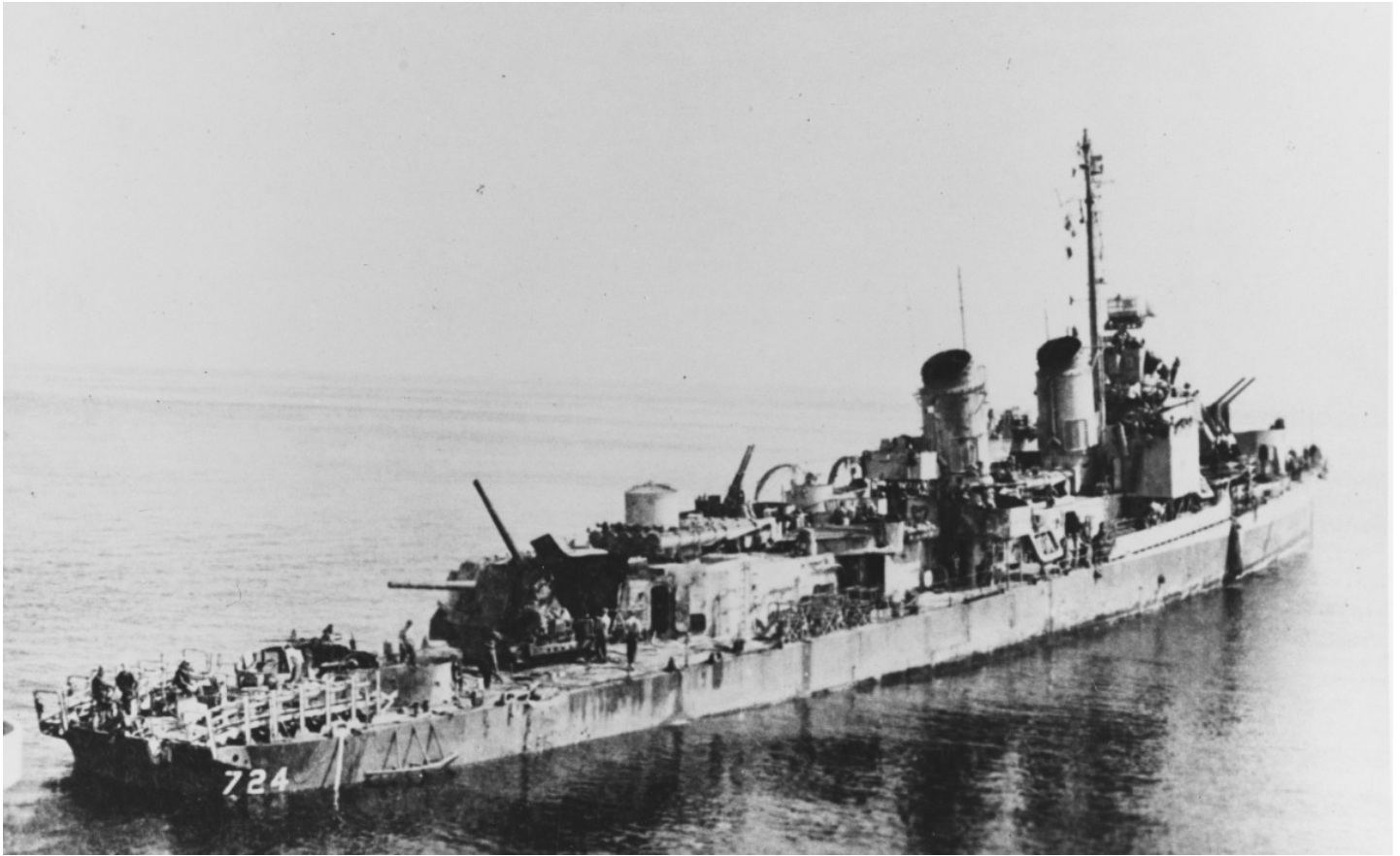
Apollo 13 splashed down safely in the South Pacific as over 40 million Americans were glued to their TV sets. The capsule was recovered by USS Iwo Jima (LPH-2).

Apollo 13 was the fourth space mission for naval aviator Jim Lovell. He had been aboard the longest-duration Gemini mission (Gemini 7) and the final Gemini mission (Gemini 12,). He had also been the command module pilot for Apollo 8, the first manned space craft to ever leave Earth's orbit and the first to orbit the moon, transmitting an extraordinary Christmas Eve TV broadcast from lunar orbit. Only one other astronaut, naval aviator John W. Young, flew four missions during the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo programs—and walked on the moon on his last mission. Only one astronaut, naval aviator Walter Schirra, Jr., flew missions in each of the three programs. Pilots who were or had been naval aviators (such as Neil Armstrong, the first to walk on the moon) played a prominent role in the "Race to the Moon" and, of course, every one of the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo missions was safely recovered by U.S. Navy warships.

For more on James Lovell's extraordinary Navy career, his four space missions, and the contributions of naval aviators to the early U.S. space program, please see attachment H-045-3.

H-gram "back issues" may be found here [<https://www.history.navy.mil/about-us/leadership/director/directors-corner/h-grams.html>]. As always, feel free to share widely—there are some truly inspirational stories.

"Houston, we've had a problem," calmly reported James A. Lovell, mission commander of Apollo 13, after a fire and an explosion in an oxygen tank had crippled the command and service modules. The spacecraft was 180,000 miles from Earth heading to the moon for what was supposed to be the third lunar landing. Using the lunar module's independent supply of power, oxygen, and propulsion as a "lifeboat," the three-man crew of Lovell, Jack L. Swigert, Jr., and Fred W. Haise, Jr., were able to survive as Mission Control in Houston worked feverishly to devise solutions to what became the only mission: to bring the astronauts back to Earth safely, hampered by many unknown variables regarding the severity of the damage. Unable to "turn around," the only way home for the astronauts was to continue to the moon and use the propulsion of the lunar module and the moon's gravity to act as a slingshot back to Earth, a trajectory that took the three astronauts farther away from Earth than any man has been before or since. After several harrowing touch-and-go days,



USS Laffey (DD-724), photographed from USS PCE-851, on Okinawa Radar Picket Station Number 1 after being hit by kamikaze aircraft and bombs, and sustaining several near misses, 16 April 1945 (NH 78233).

H-045-1: The Ship That Wouldn't Die (2)—USS *Laffey* (DD-724), 16 April 1945

H-Gram 045, [Attachment 1](#)
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC
April 2020

"No! I'll never abandon ship as long as a single gun will fire!"

—Commander Frederick J. Becton, commanding officer, USS *Laffey* (DD-724), 16 April 1945

Prelude

USS *Laffey* (DD-724) was the second U.S. destroyer named after Irish-born Seaman Bartlett

Laffey, who was awarded a Medal of Honor for his actions as member of the crew of the Union stern-wheel gunboat USS *Marmora* in action ashore against Confederate forces at Yazoo City, Mississippi, on 5 March 1864. The first USS *Laffey* (DD-459) was a *Benson*-class destroyer that had rescued survivors of the torpedoed carrier *Wasp* (CV-7), and fought in the Battle of Cape Esperance off Guadalcanal. She was lost in heroic action in the brutal no-quarter 13 November 1942 night melee off Guadalcanal, in which she dueled the Japanese battleship *Hiei* with a CPA (closest point of approach) of 20 feet. *Laffey* lost 59 of her 247 crewmen, was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation, and her skipper, Lieutenant Commander William Hank, was posthumously awarded his second Navy Cross (see H-Grams 011 and 012).

The second *Laffey* was one of 58 new *Allen M. Sumner*-class destroyers (of which 55 were

completed during the war), designed as a follow-on to the *Fletcher* class. *Laffey* was 2,200 tons, with a speed of 34 knots and a crew of 336. Instead of the *Fletchers'* five single 5-inch gun mounts, *Laffey* had three twin 5-inch/38-caliber gun mounts, with two forward and one aft. This was double the forward firepower of a *Fletcher* and, at long range, the aft 5-inch mount on *Laffey* was designed to fire over the mainmast, adding even more forward firepower. *Laffey* retained the two quintuple 21-inch torpedo tube mounts from the early *Fletchers* (many *Fletchers* and *Sumners* would later have one torpedo bank removed in favor of additional 40-mm anti-aircraft guns). In addition, *Laffey* had 12 40-mm Bofors and 11 20-mm Oerlikon anti-aircraft guns, plus six K-gun depth-charge throwers, and two depth-charge racks on the stern.

From bow to stern, *Laffey's* gun armament was as follows: Mount 51 (twin 5-inch/38-caliber), Mount 52 (twin 5-inch/38-caliber) superimposed over Mount 51. Two 20-mm antiaircraft guns were on each side of the forward superstructure (Groups 21 and 22). A twin 40-mm mount was on each side of the forward stack (Mounts 41 and 42). Two 20-mm guns were on the port side of the aft stack (Group 24). Two 20-mm guns were on the starboard side above the aft deckhouse (Group 23). Two quad 40-mm mounts were on top of the aft deckhouse, staggered starboard (Mount 43) and port (Mount 44), so both mounts could train to either side or aft. Mount 53 (twin 5-inch/38-caliber) was aft of the deckhouse. Three 20-mm guns (Group 25) were on the fantail in a triangular arrangement, between Mount 53 and the depth-charge racks on the stern.

The commanding officer of *Laffey* since her commissioning on 8 February 1944 was 36-year-old Commander Frederick Julius Becton (USNA '31), one of the most battle-tested skippers at that time, already with four Silver Stars. Becton had been the executive officer of destroyer *Aaron Ward* (DD-483) during the same battle in which the first *Laffey* was lost. During that battle, two

powerful Japanese "Long Lance" torpedoes passed under *Aaron Ward* without exploding before she hit Japanese destroyer *Akatsuki* (which blew up and sank) and before getting hit nine times in return, going dead in the water, and nearly being hit the next morning by main battery 14-inch shells from the crippled Japanese battleship *Hiei*. *Aaron Ward* suffered 15 dead and 57 wounded.

Becton was in command of *Aaron Ward* on 7 April 1943 when she was bombed and sunk by six Japanese Val dive-bombers while defending a convoy off Guadalcanal that included *LST-449* (with Lieutenant Junior Grade John F. Kennedy as a passenger on his way to assume command of *PT-109*). Despite valiant attempts by her crew to save her, *Aaron Ward* sank with the loss of 27 killed or missing and 59 wounded (see H-Gram 018).

Becton was awarded his first Silver Star as the operations officer for Destroyer Squadron 21, embarked on the destroyer *Nicholas* (DD-449) during the Battles of Kula Gulf, Kolombangara, and other night actions in the Central Solomon Islands between 5-13 July and 17-18 August 1943. Becton's second Silver Star was awarded while he was in command of *Laffey* during the Normandy "D-Day" invasion of June 1944. *Laffey* bombarded German gun emplacements on 8 and 9 June, and drove off an attack by German E-boats on 12 June that had blown off the stern of destroyer *Nelson* (DD-623) with a torpedo (see H-Gram 031). *Laffey* then participated in the Battle of Cherbourg on 25 June, in which battleships *Nevada* (BB-36), *Texas* (BB-35), and *Arkansas* (BB-33) dueled with large-caliber German shore batteries. During this engagement, *Laffey* was hit by a medium-caliber (about 6-inch) shell that skipped off the water and lodged itself in the boatswain's locker without detonating. The unexploded shell was hoisted out and rolled overboard.

After Normandy, *Laffey* sailed to the Pacific, participating in operations in support of the Leyte landings in October 1944, where she subsequently rescued and captured a downed Japanese pilot, who was transferred to carrier *Enterprise* (CV-6). Becton received his third Silver Star in command of *Laffey* for actions during *kamikaze* attacks at the landings at Ormoc Bay, Philippines, on 7 December, and then a fourth Silver Star for defending against *kamikaze* during the landings at Lingayen Gulf, Philippines, in January 1945 (see H-Gram 040).

During the Okinawa Operation, *Laffey* was assigned to the Gunfire and Covering Force (Task Force 54–TF 54) Unit 2, under the command of Rear Admiral C. Turner Joy, supporting old battleships *Arkansas* (BB-33) and *Colorado* (BB-45), and heavy cruisers *San Francisco* (CA-38) and *Minneapolis* (CA-36). TF 54 supported the capture of Kerama Retto before providing pre-invasion bombardment of Okinawa and then gunfire support to forces ashore.

On 12 April 1945, *Laffey* received orders to proceed to Kerama Retto and cross-deck the fighter direction team from destroyer *Cassin Young* (DD-793), which had been damaged and had suffered one dead and 59 wounded in a *kamikaze* attack that day on Radar Picket Station No. 1. The next day, *Laffey* received her orders to proceed to the same station, brought on board the two fighter direction officers and three enlisted men with their special electronics gear, and also loaded 300 additional rounds of 5-inch ammunition so as to have a full load out. *Laffey* arrived at Radar Picket Station No. 1, 30 nautical miles northwest of the northern tip of Okinawa, relieving destroyer-minesweeper *J. William Ditter* (DM-31), which, on 4 June, would get hit by a *kamikaze* and knocked out of the war.

Already on Radar Picket Station No. 1 were two large support landing craft: *LCS(L)-51*, commanded by Lieutenant Howell D. Chickering, and *LCS(L)-116*, commanded by Lieutenant A. J.

Wierzbicki. The 160-foot LCS(L) was an adaptation of the infantry landing craft (LCI) with additional 40-mm (fore and aft) and 20-mm guns, and .50 caliber machine-guns, along with two high-capacity pumps that enabled it to act as fire and rescue craft.

During the day on 14 April, *Laffey's* fighter direction team shared combat air patrol with destroyer *Bryant* (DD-665) on Radar Picket Station No. 3 to vector aircraft in shooting down a group of three and then a group of eight Japanese planes, none in range of *Laffey's* guns. (Some accounts switch the order of these two events.)

Sunday, 15 April, was quiet for *Laffey*, with no engagements. The destroyer was directed to investigate a downed Japanese aircraft that had remained afloat. *Laffey* found the plane, with the dead pilot still in the cockpit, crewmen retrieved the pilot's codebook and other items of interest from the plane, and then *Laffey* sank it.



This view of *Laffey* shows severe exterior damage to the wardroom bulkhead on her starboard side (NH 75423).

Monday, 16 April 1945: *Laffey* Fights for Her Life

There are many accounts of *Laffey's* fight. All of them differ to varying degrees about specifics of the Japanese attacks, particularly in the latter stages. Times, type of aircraft, direction of attack,

and other details often don't match. I used *Laffey's* own after-action report as the baseline, but even that was subject to revision over the years. I have attempted to reconstruct the attack using multiple sources and will try to highlight those aspects on which all accounts substantially agree and note some of the differences.

At 0800 on 16 April, the sea was smooth with a light breeze and very good visibility. At 0808, *Laffey's* air search radar detected many incoming aircraft from the north and the destroyer commenced maneuvering on various courses and speeds. *Laffey's* fighter direction officer requested immediate combat air patrol and the escort carrier *Shamrock Bay* (CVE-84) scrambled four FM-2 Wildcats of Composite Squadron 94 (VC-94), but they would take time to reach *Laffey*. By 0825, *Laffey's* radar showed too many aircraft to count. These aircraft were the lead elements of *Kikusui* ("Floating Chrysanthemums") No. 3, the third mass Japanese *kamikaze* attack on U.S. forces off Okinawa. *Kikusui* No. 3 included a total of 165 *kamikaze* aircraft (120 Japanese navy and 45 Japanese army) and 150 other aircraft in conventional strike and escort roles.

At 0830, one Aichi D3A Val dive-bomber was observed in proximity of *Laffey*, probably conducting reconnaissance. When fired upon by *Laffey's* forward 5-inch guns, the Val jettisoned its bomb and departed. Shortly afterward, four more Vals were spotted at a range of eight miles to the northeast. When fired upon, the Vals split into two pairs and commenced a coordinated attack from ahead and astern *Laffey*. Commander Becton maneuvered to try to bring broadside (maximum number of guns) to bear on the Vals. There had been debate in the U.S. Navy as to whether the best way to defeat *kamikaze* aircraft was by radical maneuver or by bringing the maximum number of guns to bear. Eventually, it was decided that although maneuver was effective against bombs, the faster speed of the *kamikaze* rendered the ships' maneuvers moot, and maximizing firepower became the

preferred tactic—although skippers had to make split-second decisions to adapt to specific circumstances.

Laffey's Mounts 51 and 52 took the two Vals on the starboard bow under fire, downing one Val (aircraft number one) at 9,000 yards and another (number two) at 3,000 yards. (Some accounts indicate that the first two Vals were hit by 20-mm gunfire—effective range 1,600 yards, max range 7,400 yards). Mount 53 took the two Vals circling down the starboard side to get behind *Laffey* under fire and hit one (number three) with VT-fuze ammunition at 3,000 yards. The Val's fixed landing gear caught a wave top and the damaged plane crashed into the sea. The other Val (number four), crossing starboard-to-port astern was hit by fire from both Mount 53 and from *LCS(L)-51* (which was on *Laffey's* port quarter) and crashed about 5,000 yards to port from the destroyer near *LCS(L)-51*. *Laffey* was four for four at this point with no hits received (some accounts credit the support landing craft with the shoot down of the fourth Val and this is at least partially correct).

Almost immediately after the four Vals were shot down, two newer and faster Yokosuka DY4 Judy dive-bombers commenced near simultaneous high-speed attacks from opposite sides. The Judy (number five) approaching from the starboard quarter was shot down by 40-mm and 20-mm fire at 3,000 yards. Ten seconds later, the Judy (number six) coming in from the port quarter was strafing as it was hit by 40-mm and 20-mm fire before crashing in the water close aboard the after stack. The port Judy's bomb exploded, wounding several gunners and knocking out the SG surface search/low-altitude aircraft and fire control radar antenna, and a radio antenna. Fires were quickly extinguished and other crewmen took the place of wounded gunners. *Laffey* was now six for six (or five for six), with some damage from a near-miss *kamikaze* and bomb explosion.

First *Kamikaze* Hit. At 0839, another Val (number seven) came in from the port bow through 5-inch

fire and was hit and slightly deflected by 20-mm gunfire. The Val grazed the top of Mount 53 from fore to aft and crashed just off the starboard quarter. The gun captain in Mount 53 was spared as he had just ducked inside the turret to deal with a misfire in one of the 5-inch guns, but one man in the mount was killed by wing fragments of the plane. The plane also spewed aviation fuel over the after parts of *Laffey*. (Some accounts count this as a *kamikaze* hit and others as a near miss).

At 0843 a third Judy (number eight) came in low and fast on the starboard beam and was hit by 40-mm and 20-mm fire before it exploded in mid-air close aboard. In only 12 minutes of battle, *Laffey's* gunners were seven for eight, with only some damage received from a two near-miss *kamikaze* plane crashes. This was followed by about a three-minute respite.

Second Kamikaze Hit. At 0845, another Judy (number nine—some accounts note a Val) came in from the port beam and *Laffey's* luck began to run out. Despite repeated 40-mm and 20-mm hits, the Judy just missed the port motor whaleboat and then crashed into the two 20-mm mounts (Group 23) on the starboard side abaft the after stack, spewing burning gasoline, destroying the guns, and killing three gunners outright while a fourth jumped over the side in flames. The fire overran the two 40-mm quad mounts (43 and 44) on top of the after deckhouse, significantly reducing *Laffey's* defensive firepower. Fires also threatened Mount 44's magazine below; fortunately, the protective cans for the 40-mm ammunition prevented a larger explosion. Clips of 40-mm shells around the gun tubs began to cook off even as crewmen were jettisoning them over the side (Mount 43 would be re-manned in local control when fires were extinguished). The crash also knocked out communication to the forward engine room, but the engineers would crank up speed to the max when they heard heavy and fast gunfire and slow down when it was quiet.

Third Kamikaze Hit. At 0847, a Val (number ten) came in low from astern, strafing as it approached and, despite being hit by 20-mm fire from the fantail guns, crashed through the 20-mm mounts (Group 25), destroying all three and killing six gunners before hitting the starboard after corner of Mount 53 as flaming gasoline covered the fantail. The plane disintegrated and the bomb exploded, starting a major fire that threatened the aft 5-inch magazine, which Becton quickly ordered flooded. The gun captain of Mount 53, who was directing fire from the side hatch (because the top hatch had been jammed shut by the plane that had grazed the turret) was somewhat miraculously blown clear of the turret unharmed.

First Bomb Hit, Fourth Kamikaze Hit. Moments afterward, yet another Val (number 11) came out of the sun from astern, dropped a bomb that hit two feet inboard of the deck edge abeam Mount 53, and crashed into Mount 53, finishing it off and killing six men inside.

Second Bomb Hit. Less than two minutes later, another Val (number 12—*Laffey's* after-action report doesn't specifically identify this aircraft by type) came in from astern and dropped a bomb that hit the ship on the starboard quarter just above the propeller guard. Although taken under fire by the 20-mm guns in Group 24 (by the after funnel on the port side), the plane flew on. The bomb exploded in the after 20-mm magazine and fragments ruptured hydraulic lines in the steering gear and jammed the rudder at 26 degrees to port. After this hit, *Laffey* steamed in a tight circle, with only acceleration and deceleration as a means to disrupt Japanese aim. Even though the ship was down by the stern, it was her good fortune that the watertight bulkheads and hatches to the aft engineering spaces held, which prevented severe flooding and also ensured that she had full power throughout the attack. At this point, Mount 53 and 40-mm Mounts 43 and 44 were out of action, along with five 20-mm mounts

destroyed, making *Laffey* very vulnerable from astern.

During these attacks on *Laffey*, the four FM-2 Wildcats off *Shamrock Bay* were engaging over 20 Japanese aircraft of various types, which would have made *Laffey's* situation even worse.

Lieutenant (j.g.) Carl J. Rieman rolled in on a Val that jinked and was then shot down by Rieman's wingman, Dick Collier. Rieman then shot down a Val and subsequently fired on a Nakajima B5N Kate torpedo bomber, killing the pilot and sending it down. He then hit another Kate with the last of his ammunition and, as he followed the plane down to see if it would crash, an F4U Corsair came in and added more holes to it. Some of the fighters continued to make attempts to scatter the Japanese even when they were out of ammunition. Not counting Rieman's last Kate, which he didn't claim, the four Wildcats accounted for six Japanese aircraft before they had to break off, low on fuel and ammunition (some accounts say only four Japanese were shot down). (Rieman survived the war and, when he passed in 2011, had 12 children, 50 grandchildren, 84 great-grandchildren, and two great-great-grandchildren.)

Also, as *Laffey* was being attacked, so too were the two support landing craft. *LCS(L)-116's* forward 40-mm mount was about to fire on a Japanese plane, when an F4U Corsair fighter arrived and shot it down. However, another *kamikaze* came in carrying a bomb and hit the after 40-mm mount, killing three and wounding others. Yet another *kamikaze* came in and good shooting by a .50-caliber machine gun hit the plane in the cockpit. It overshot and impacted the water on the far side. *LCS(L)-116* ultimately suffered topside damage along with 17 dead and 12 wounded during additional attacks.

Fifth and Sixth Kamikaze Hits. As the badly damaged *Laffey* steamed in tight circles, two *kamikaze* in quick succession came in from the vulnerable port quarter. The first one, a Val

(number 13), crashed into the after deckhouse as damage control parties were fighting the fires. Moments later, a Judy (number 14) crashed into almost the same spot in a big ball of fire, killing four crewmen and starting another major gasoline fire.

About this point, 12 U.S. Marine Corps F4U Corsairs of VMF-441 "Blackjacks," launched from Yontan Airfield on Okinawa, joined the fray, shooting down between 15 and 17 Japanese aircraft in the vicinity of *Laffey*. VMF-441 had arrived at Yontan on 7 April. Yontan was one of the two major airfields captured in the first day of the invasion (Yontan by the Marines and Kadena by the Army). The Marine Corsairs performed heroically, often pursuing Japanese aircraft into *Laffey's* anti-aircraft fire. Aircraft shot down by Corsairs, in whole or in part near *Laffey*, also account for the differing numbers of aircraft reported as downed by the destroyer.

A Val (number not reported) came at *Laffey* from the port side, pursued by a Corsair. The Corsair forced the Val to overshoot the destroyer and crash in the water on the ship's far side. (This is not reflected in the after-action report or in Morison, but is mentioned in some accounts. This may have been one of the many aircraft downed by Corsairs that are not included in *Laffey's* report, which only includes those that were near threats to the ship.)

A Ki-43 Oscar (number 15) fighter came at *Laffey* from the port side on a strafing run with a Corsair in hot pursuit. Gunners on *Laffey* tried to shoot down the Oscar without hitting the Corsair. The Oscar hit the destroyer's mast with its wing, carried away the port yardarm and the U.S. ensign, struggled to gain altitude, but then crashed in the water on the starboard side. The pursuing Corsair hit *Laffey's* SC air search radar antenna and knocked it down. The damaged F4U was able to gain enough altitude so the pilot could roll the plane over and bail out before the aircraft crashed. The pilot was rescued by *LCS(L)-*

51. A signalman climbed *Laffey's* mast and attached a brand-new flag. (All accounts are fairly consistent on this episode, except some have the Oscar coming from starboard. The Oscar was a Japanese army fighter, which would indicate an unusual combined navy and army attack on the same target. Although the reports note an Oscar, it is also true Oscars were easily confused with Japanese Navy A6M Zero/Zeke fighters.)

First Bomb Near Miss. A Judy (number 16) coming in fast and low from the port bow with a Corsair on its tail crashed close aboard a few yards from *Laffey*. Its bomb exploded, spraying fragments over the forward part of the ship, mortally wounding one gunner and wounding two others including the gun captain in Mount 52, and severing communications with the forward two 5-inch gun mounts. The machine gun control officer, Ensign James Townsley, quickly rigged a work-around, climbing on top of the pilot house with a microphone that he plugged into the ship's loudspeaker system, and providing warning and direction of incoming aircraft (Townsley would be awarded a Silver Star for this action). The Corsair is generally give credit for shooting down this *kamikaze*.

Another Judy (number 17), coming in fast and low from the starboard quarter, was shot down by 40-mm (Mount 41) and 20-mm (Group 21) fire at 800 yards from the ship (sixth or seventh plane shot down by *Laffey*).

An Oscar (number 18), coming in from the starboard beam, took a direct hit in the engine by a 5-inch shell from Mount 52, which was still firing in local manual control despite the damage and wounded gunners from the earlier hit. The Oscar disintegrated 500 yards from the ship. Mount 51, also operating in local, shifted fire to a Val (number 19) coming in from the starboard bow and knocked it down with a VT-fuze shell, also about 500 yards from the ship (seventh and eighth or eighth and ninth plane shot down by *Laffey*).

There was a brief lull at this point, during which the assistant communications officer, Lieutenant Frank Manson, noted the severe damage to the aft end of the ship and asked Commander Becton if he was considering abandoning the ship. Becton responded that he would not abandon the ship as long as there was single gun left to fire. Although *Laffey* was down by the stern and her aft end was mostly on fire or burned out, her hull integrity was still in good shape.

Third Bomb Hit. Using the sun and smoke from *Laffey* as cover, a Val (number 20) approached from the destroyer's undefended stern and planted a bomb on her fantail, blowing an eight-by-ten-foot hole in the deck just aft of Mount 53. Shrapnel from the bomb hit the emergency casualty aid station topside. The bomb also killed Ensign Robert Thomsen, who had left his station in the command information center after the radars were knocked out in order to take charge of a fire party aft (for which he would receive a posthumous Navy Cross), along with other members of the fire party. The Val clipped the starboard yardarm, but kept going until it was shot down by a Corsair ahead of the ship. The 20-mm gunners in Group 21 (starboard forward) continued to fire on the Val to make sure it crashed.



Comprehensive view of bomb damage on Laffey's starboard side abreast of her bridge (NH 75427).

Fourth Bomb Hit. Another Val (number 21) came in from the starboard bow strafing. Despite fire from 5-inch, 40-mm, and 20-mm guns, the plane dropped a bomb and barely cleared the ship before it was shot down by a Corsair. Seaman Feline Salcido didn't think Commander Becton saw the bomb coming in and he shoved the skipper down as the bomb exploded in the 20-mm Group 21 (which had been firing to the last) just below the starboard bridge. Fragments penetrated the wardroom, which was being used as a casualty aid station, killing several of the wounded, the attending pharmacist's mate, and wounding the ship's doctor.

At 0947, another Judy (number 22) came in from port side forward with a Corsair on its tail. Hit repeatedly by 40-mm (Mount 42) and 20-mm (Group 22) fire and by tracer fire from the pursuing Corsair, the Judy finally blew up close aboard and crashed (credit has generally been given to the Corsair).

By this time, additional combat air patrol had arrived, including Corsairs from carrier *Intrepid* (CV-11) and Hellcats from light carrier *San Jacinto* (CVL-30), and the Japanese attacks on *Laffey* finally ceased. Although the situation on *Laffey* was dire, with the stern down due to flooded compartments aft, fires still raging aft and the steering gear still jammed over, Becton assessed his ship as still 30 percent combat effective. The elevating mechanism of Mount 51 had a break in its hydraulic line and had to be elevated manually. Mount 52 had no electrical power and had to be trained and elevated manually. The 40-mm twin Mounts 41 and 42 were undamaged and the quad Mount 43 had been re-manned after fires had been beaten back, but electrical power to the directors was knocked out and all were operating in

degraded mode. Four of the 11 20-mm guns (Group 22 and 24), all on the port side, were still operating. The air search and surface search radars were destroyed.

Aftermath

At about 1100, *LCS(L)-51* came alongside to assist with firefighting, although she had been damaged during the battle as well, and had shot down several aircraft herself. *LCS(L)-51* had a seven-foot hole in her port side amidships and three crewmen wounded.

During the 80-minute attack, *Laffey* had shot down at least eight aircraft and damaged the six *kamikaze* that hit her. Moreover, she had been damaged by four direct bombs hits (plus bombs carried by the *kamikaze*). *Laffey's* heroic crew suffered 32 dead and 71 (or 72) wounded.

Destroyer-minesweeper *Macomb* (DMS-23) took *Laffey* in tow toward Kerama Retto at four knots, which was a struggle due to the jammed rudder, before turning the destroyer over to tugs *Pakana* (ATF-108) and *Tawakoni* (ATF-114). After emergency repairs, *Laffey* departed Kerama Retto on her own power on 22 April, heading toward Seattle via Saipan and Pearl Harbor. While at Pier 48 in Seattle, *Laffey* was opened to public viewing. Apparently, there was some concern that shipyard workers were "slacking off" in anticipation of the war's end, and this was intended as motivation to demonstrate that the conflict was still far from over.

In addition to her five battle stars, *Laffey* was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation. Commander Frederick Julian Becton was awarded the Navy Cross. Ensign Robert

Clarence Thomsen was awarded a posthumous Navy Cross. Other crewmen were awarded six Silver Stars, 18 Bronze Stars, and one Navy Letter of Commendation. The commanding officer of LCS(L)-51, Lieutenant Howell D. Chickering, was also awarded a Navy Cross as his ship was given credit for downing six Japanese aircraft. Presidential Unit Citation for USS Laffey:

For extraordinary heroism in action as a Picket Ship on Radar Picket Station Number One during an attack by approximately 30 enemy Japanese planes, thirty miles northwest of the northern tip of Okinawa on 16 April 1945. Fighting her guns valiantly against waves of hostile suicide aircraft plunging toward her from all directions, the USS LAFFEY set up relentless barrages of anti-aircraft fire during an extremely heavy and concentrated air attack. Repeatedly finding her targets, she shot down eight enemy planes clear of the ship and damaged six more before they crashed on board. Struck by two bombs, crash-dived by suicide planes and frequently strafed, she withstood the devastating blows unflinchingly and, despite severe damage and heavy casualties, continued to fight effectively against insurmountable odds, and her brilliant performance in this action reflects highest credit upon herself and the United States Naval Service.

For the President,

James Forrestal

Secretary of the Navy

Navy Cross citation for Commander Becton:

The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the Navy Cross to Commander Frederick Julian Becton,

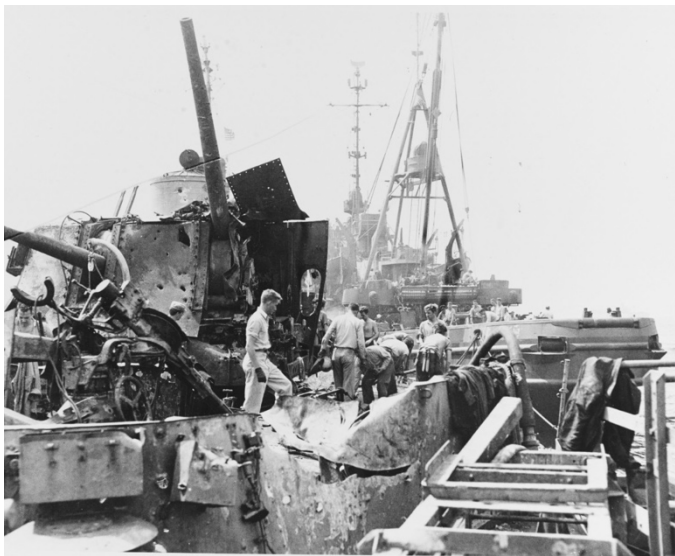
United States Navy, for extraordinary heroism and distinguished service in the line of his profession as Commanding Officer of the Destroyer USS LAFFEY (DD-724), in action against enemy Japanese forces off Okinawa, on 16 April 1945. With his ship under savage attack by thirty hostile planes, Commander Becton skillfully countered the fanatical enemy tactics, employing every conceivable maneuver and directing all his guns in an intense and unrelenting barrage of fire to protect his ship against the terrific onslaught. Crashed by six of the overwhelming aerial force which penetrated the deadly anti-aircraft defense, the USS LAFFEY, under his valiant command fought fiercely for over two hours against the attackers, blasting eight of the enemy out of the sky. Although the explosions of the suicide planes and two additional bombs caused severe structural damage, loss of armament, and heavy personnel casualties, Commander Becton retained complete control of his ship, coolly directing repairs in the midst of furious combat, and emerged at the close of the action with his gallant warship afloat and still an effective fighting unit. His unremitting tenacity of purpose, courageous leadership and heroic devotion to duty under fire were inspiring to those who served with him and enhanced the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

Navy Cross citation (posthumous) for Ensign Robert Clarence Thomsen:

Ensign Thomsen, Navigator, served as assistant evaluator in Combat Information Center (CIC) during this action, performing his duties in a superior manner. After radars were put out of action by two direct hits on the mast and his services were no longer required, he proceeded aft to assist

in fighting fires that were raging as a result of two suicide crashes and a bomb hit. He fearlessly led a fire hose team into the smoke and flame of Compartment C-204-LM, where fires were threatening to set off ammunition in 5-inch Mount 3 upper handling room and in the after 5-inch magazine. There he met his death when two suicide planes crashed near him. Although his primary duties were in CIC, he unhesitatingly risked, and lost, his life when he realized the urgency of the situation which threatened the destruction of his ship. His conduct was exemplary and a source of inspiration to those who carried on the fight to save the ship, for which he had given his life."

Ensign Thomsen belonged to the USNA class of '45 (accelerated graduation in 1944).



View of extensive damage to Laffey's aft 5-inch/38-caliber gun mount (Mount 53). The damaged frame of the destroyer's starboard depth-charge rack is visible in the right foreground (NH 75421).

As a good commanding officer and leader, Becton gave full credit to his crew: "Performance by all hands was outstanding.... [T]he engineers played a vital part in saving the ship by the manner in which they furnished speed and more speed on split second notice..... [G]unnery personnel demonstrated cool-headed

resourcefulness and continued to deliver accurate fire throughout the action, often in local control. Damage control parties were undaunted, although succeeding hits undid much of their previous efforts and destroyed more of their firefighting equipment. They were utterly fearless in combating fires, although continually imperiled by exploding ammunition.... [E]specially deserving of mention were the 20mm gunners of whom at least four were killed 'in the straps' firing to the last."

Navy historian Samuel Eliot Morison noted that one of the many heroes was 18-year old Coxswain Calvin W. Cloer, who was badly burned while serving a gun. Upon seeing the wardroom crowded with other wounded who he deemed to be in need of more medical attention, he returned to his gun and was subsequently killed by a bomb. Morison noted that, "not a single gun was abandoned, despite the flames and explosions."

Laffey's squadron commander, Captain B. R. Harrison, attributed the destroyer's survival to the fact that she retained full engine and boiler power throughout, and to the superb ship handling by the commanding officer in taking most of the damage aft and avoiding the full effects of crashes from forward. Rear Admiral C. Turner Joy, commander of the Fire Support Force, TF 54 Unit 2, added that *Laffey's* performance "stands out above the outstanding."

After the war, Commander Becton went on to serve in multiple assignments, including as executive officer of the light cruiser *Manchester* (CL-83), and as commanding officer of attack transport *Glynn* (APA-239), battleship *Iowa* (BB-61), Cruiser Division 5, and Mine Force Pacific Fleet. He was promoted to rear admiral in 1955 and retired in 1966 as Naval Inspector General.

Laffey would be repaired and reactivated for the Korean War, earning two Battle Stars screening Task Force 77 carriers *Antietam* (CV-36) and *Valley Forge* (CV-45) in March through June 1952,

while also participating in the bombardment and blockade of the North Korean port of Wonsan and engaging several shore batteries. She sailed through the Suez Canal on 22 June 1952, returning to Norfolk after completing her first around-the-world deployment. In 1954, *Laffey* completed her second around-the-world deployment. In 1956, the destroyer participated in U.S. Navy reaction to the 1956 Suez Crisis following the Arab-Israeli War. The rest of her career consisted primarily of operating from the U.S. East Coast in anti-submarine hunter-killer task groups until she was decommissioned in 1968.

Laffey is currently a museum ship at Patriot's Point, Charleston, South Carolina, and is a designated National Historic Landmark. There is reportedly a Hollywood movie, to be directed by Mel Gibson, about *Laffey* in the works called *Destroyer*.

Morison summed it up best when he stated that "probably no ship has ever survived an attack of the intensity that she experienced."

Why the U.S. Navy has not seen fit to name another warship after *Laffey*, or Commander Becton, is a damn fine question.

Sources include: "USS *Laffey* Report of Damage by Bombs and Suicide Planes during Air Action on April 16, 1945," dated 27 April 1945, from Commanding Officer to the Chief of the Bureau of Ships; *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Vol. XIV: Victory in the Pacific* by Samuel Eliot Morison (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1960); NHHHC *Dictionary of American Fighting Ships (DANFS): "USS Laffey: Attacked off Okinawa in World War II,"* by Dale P. Harper in *World War II Magazine* (March 1998) at historynet.com; *The Ship That Would Not Die*, by F. Julian Becton (Missoula, MT: Pictorial Histories Publishing Co., 1987); *Hell from the Heavens: The Epic Story of the USS Laffey and World War II's Greatest Kamikaze Attack*, by John Wukovits (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2015).



USS Missouri (BB-63) about to be hit by a Japanese A6M Zero kamikaze while operating off Okinawa on 11 April 1945. The plane hit the ship's side below the main deck, causing minor damage and no casualties on board the battleship. A 40-mm quad gun mount's crew is in action in the lower foreground (NH 62696).

H-045-2: The Naval Battle of Okinawa, Part 2

H-Gram 045, *Attachment 2*
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC
April 2020

Roll Call of Valor and Sacrifice

The Battle of Okinawa was so massive that it is impossible to capture the scope of the U.S. Navy's valor and sacrifice in a relatively short piece.

Victory has a price, and in the case of Okinawa an incredibly high one: just over 4,900 U.S. Navy personnel were lost. This H-gram focuses only on those actions that resulted in significant U.S. damage and casualties, from the second mass kamikaze attack (*Kikusui* No. 2) on 11-12 April 1945 through the end of April just before *Kikusui* No. 5. I've also included significant anti-submarine actions, as U.S. ships faced kamikaze threats from above and *Kaiten* manned suicide torpedoes from below.

Each U.S. ship listed below was sunk or put out of action for over 30 days, but in every case there are

superb examples of the Navy core values of honor, courage, and commitment, and of core attributes of initiative, accountability, integrity, and—especially—toughness. I do not cover the innumerable near misses and close calls or minor damage, or frequent shoot downs of Japanese aircraft. By this time, so many damaged U.S. ships had sought refuge at Kerama Retto that it acquired the black-humor nickname of “Busted Ship Bay.” The U.S. also realized that one of the best defenses during the Japanese preferred attack hours of dawn and dusk was to generate massive smoke screens over any areas with a concentration of ships. As a result, more than a few *kamikaze* never found a target and crashed into the ocean without hitting anything. But, plenty of *kamikaze* still carried out their missions.

For the most part, casualty figures are from Appendix Two, Volume XIV (*Victory in the Pacific*) of Samuel Eliot Morison's *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II* series. In many cases more detailed analysis in years since has led to changes in the casualty figures—frequently with deaths being somewhat higher as those who died of wounds much later are factored in, but these are scattered in various accounts. If I came across other more recent figures, I use the higher number. For symbols denoting ship damage/repair status, I've used the following:

* = sunk

= damaged beyond repair

= repairs completed after the war ended

Early Antisubmarine Operations: March to Mid-April 1945

28 March

The Japanese commenced the fifth *Kaiten* operation, deploying the *Tartara* Group (submarines *I-44*, *I-47*, *I-56*, and *I-58*) to attack U.S. ships in the vicinity of Okinawa. Within a day, *I-*

47 was attacked by U.S. Navy TBM Avenger torpedo bombers and forced to dive. As soon as she surfaced, she was damaged by shrapnel from a bomb, but survived and limped back to port. The other three submarines continued with their mission, although *I-58* was hounded so frequently by U.S. aircraft that she never found a target and returned to port (she would sink the USS *Indianapolis* [CA-35] at the end of July). Some Japanese submarines had been modified to carry manned suicide torpedoes, called *Kaiten*. For more on the background and capabilities of the *Kaiten* please see H-Gram 039, attachment H-039-4)

31 March

Japanese submarine *I-8* was one of four sent out in response to the Task Force 58 raids on Japan on 18–19 March (which resulted in serious damage to aircraft carrier *Wasp* [CV-18] and grave damage to *Franklin* [CV-13] from Japanese air attack). *I-8* had been the only Japanese submarine to complete a round-trip to Germany to exchange technology and pick up critical cargo, and had also been responsible for several atrocities against merchant ship crewmen in the Indian Ocean (see H-Gram 033, attachment H-033-1, on the *Yanagi* Missions). *I-8* had been converted to carry two *Kaiten* torpedoes by having her floatplane hangar and catapult removed; however, she never actually carried any *Kaiten*.

On the night before the main landings on Okinawa, destroyer *Stockton* (DD-646), Commander W. R. Glennon in command, was patrolling off Kerama Retto, assisted by the newly arrived PBM Mariners of VPB-21 that were tended by *Chandeleur* (AV-10) in Kerama Retto. *Stockton* detected a surface contact that quickly dove. The destroyer gained sonar contact and made seven depth-charge attacks over the next four hours, expending her entire load out of depth charges. Destroyer *Morrison* (DD-560) arrived just as the submarine surfaced and then quickly

submerged. *Morrison* laid a depth-charge pattern over the submarine and presumably damaged it. *I-8's* skipper, Lieutenant Commander Shinohara, then decided to fight it out on the surface. *I-8* engaged *Morrison* with her deck gun in a 30-minute gun battle before direct hits from *Morrison's* 5-inch guns hit the submarine, which then capsized and went down by the stern. *Morrison* put a boat in the water at daybreak and managed to rescue (and capture) one of *I-8's* gun crew; all other crewmen were lost.

5 April

Destroyer *Hudson* (DD-475), Lieutenant Commander R. R. Pratt in command, was on radar picket station when she received a signal from *LCS(L)-115* of a submarine sighting. At 0345, *Hudson* detected a surfaced contact on radar and fired a star shell that caused the submarine to dive. *Hudson* reacquired the submarine on sonar and, over the next six hours, conducted six depth-charge attacks. The submarine is believed to be *RO-49*, lost with all 79 hands. This was the second submarine that *Hudson* received credit for sinking; the first was engaged off Bougainville on 31 January 1944, although the exact identity of that submarine is not clear.

9 April

Destroyers *Monssen* (DD-798), Lieutenant Commander E. G. Sanderson in command, and *Mertz* (DD-691), Commander W. S. Maddox in command, were screening TF 58 45 nautical miles west of Okinawa, when *Monssen's* radar detected a surfacing submarine at a range of 900 yards. *Monssen* dropped three patterns of 13 depth charges, and then *Mertz* dropped three more, followed by another two patterns from *Monssen*. The submarine was believed to be *RO-56*, lost with all 79 hands.

Kamikaze Attacks and Anti-Submarine Operations, 11 April-2 May 1945

11 April

Japanese *kamikaze* attacks increased on 11 April, mostly directed against the Fast Carrier Task Force (TF 58) in advance of the major *kamikaze* attack, *Kikusui* No. 2, planned for 12-13 April against ships supporting the continuing Okinawa landings. There was advance intelligence warning that the attack was coming, including from a Japanese prisoner of war picked up on 6 April. In anticipation of the attacks, TF 58 cancelled support missions over Okinawa and increased the numbers of fighters on combat air patrol. Fighters shot down many of the Japanese planes, but some still got through.

At 1443, a Zeke fighter crashed into the battleship *Missouri* (BB-63) on the starboard quarter (a famous photo shows the plane an instant before impact). The plane made a small dent in the *Missouri's* side (which may still be seen on the ship today at Pearl Harbor) and parts of the plane and the pilot's body ended up on the main deck. A gasoline fire was quickly extinguished. No one on *Missouri* was killed or seriously injured. Crewmen were going to hose the remains of the pilot over the side, when *Missouri's* skipper, Captain William Callaghan (brother of Rear Admiral Daniel J. Callaghan, awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor at Guadalcanal) ordered that the pilot be given a military funeral with honors. This was done the next day, a somewhat controversial act at the time given the general viciousness of the fighting by that point in the war.

Shortly after the hit on *Missouri*, a D4Y Judy dive-bomber clipped the deck edge of carrier *Enterprise* (CV-6), carrying away some 40-mm gun-mount shields. At 1510, another Judy crashed close aboard the starboard bow, throwing debris up on to the flight deck and causing a Hellcat fighter on the starboard catapult to ignite. The burning and pilotless plane was

catapulted into the water. The damage was substantial enough that *Enterprise* had to come off line and go to Ulithi for repairs before returning to Okinawa in May.

Kidd (DD-661). On the afternoon of 11 April 1945, several destroyers performing radar picket duty for TF 58 came under air attack. At 1357, lookouts on destroyer *Kidd* saw a Japanese plane dive out of the sun heading for *Bullard* (DD-660), which reacted and shot the plane down at the last moment after sustaining minor damage. *Kidd* and the other destroyers, working with combat air patrol, drove off several other attacks. At 1409, *Kidd* observed two aircraft engaging in an apparent dogfight. These were thought to be two Japanese aircraft engaging in a deceptive tactic to make the U.S. ships think one of them was friendly. One of the planes then dove to wave-top level and took aim at destroyer *Black* (DD-666), which was about 1,500 yards on *Kidd's* starboard beam. Despite being hit by anti-aircraft fire, the smoking plane popped up and passed directly over *Black*, heading for *Kidd*. With little time to react, *Kidd's* 40-mm and 20-mm gunners scored more hits, but the plane still bore in and crashed into the forward fireroom, killing everyone in the space. The bomb on the plane passed through the ship and exploded just on the other side, seriously wounding the commanding officer, Commander Harry G. Moore. *Kidd* suffered 38 killed and 55 wounded in the attack.

The executive officer, Lieutenant B. H. Britton, took command of the ship and, despite the severe damage, her crew brought the fires and flooding under control while the gunners continued to engage other targets. The destroyer *Hale* (DD-642) came alongside to transfer her doctor via high-line as *Kidd's* doctor had also been severely wounded. While doing this, a bomb impacted about 20 yards from *Kidd*, jolting both ships. Despite the damage, *Kidd* was able to reach Ulithi on her own power and then headed to the U.S. West Coast for more extensive repairs. Commander Moore was awarded a Silver Star (I

can't find any records indicating that Lieutenant Britton received an award). *Kidd* served until 1964, but was not extensively modified. Now a museum ship in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, *Kidd* is the closest of the three surviving *Fletcher*-class destroyers (*The Sullivans* [DD-537] in Buffalo and *Cassin Young* [DD-793] in Boston) to the class's World War II configuration.

At 1507 that same day, the carrier *Essex* (CV-9) suffered a near miss from a bomb on the port side that did extensive damage to the engineering plant, fuel tanks, and some of her electronics. *Essex* lost 33 men killed, with another 33 wounded. Of the 11 fleet carriers at the start of the campaign, five were out of action at least temporarily due to Japanese air attacks.

12-13 April

Kikusui No. 2 consisted of 185 *kamikaze* aircraft (125 navy and 60 army) with additional aircraft for conventional attacks and escorts (and those would turn themselves into *kamikazes* if they were damaged and the pilot didn't think he could make it back).

12 April

The weather on 12 April was described as "gorgeous," and the Japanese attacked with 185 *kamikaze*, accompanied by 150 fighters and 45 torpedo bombers. At 0600, about 25 Japanese aircraft approached the northern radar picket station. A few were shot down by night fighters still on station, but most made it through to the beachhead area, where they were driven off by shipboard anti-aircraft fire. The main attacks commenced in the afternoon.

Radar Pickett Station No. 1—*Purdy* (DD-734), *Cassin Young* (DD-793), *LCS (L)-33, and *LCS (L)-57*.** A lesson from *Kikusui* No. 1 was not to have lone destroyers on radar picket stations, so

Purdy and *Cassin Young* were doubled up on Station No. 1 and accompanied by four large support landing craft. In the afternoon of 12 April, 30 Val dive-bombers commenced an attack. *Cassin* and *Purdy* combined to down several *kamikaze*. Then, at about 1340, a *kamikaze* made a run at *Cassin Young* and was shot down, hitting the water only 15 feet away. She shot down another *kamikaze* before a third flew into the port yardarm and fell in pieces on the ship, knocking out the forward fire room. Although 59 men were wounded, only one was killed. As this was happening, *Purdy* shot down another *kamikaze*. *Cassin Young* departed for repairs at Kerama Retto and then Ulithi. She would return to Okinawa in June and get hit again—worse—in July.

At 1441, another raid of Vals came in on Station No.1. One Val *kamikaze* dove on *LCS(L)-33* and barely missed, carrying away radio antennas before hitting the water. Then, two more dove from opposite directions. *LCS(L)-33* got one of them, but the other crashed amidships, setting fire to most of the vessel and knocking out all the pumps. The skipper ordered abandon ship, with four dead and 29 wounded. At the same time, despite shooting down three *kamikaze*, *LCS(L)-57* was hit on her forward 40-mm mount, another blew a hole in her side as it crashed close aboard, and then a third *kamikaze* hit forward. Shortly after, *LCS(L)-33* was hit by yet another *kamikaze*, which ensured she sank. *LCS(L)-57* suffered two dead and six wounded and, despite being damaged by three *kamikaze*, made it to Kerama Retto under her own power.

As the LCSs were getting hit, another Val came at *Purdy* with three U.S. fighters in hot pursuit. *Purdy* held fire to avoid hitting the friendlies, but finally had to open up. She hit the Val with a 5-inch shell and the *kamikaze* hit the water 20 feet short, but bounced into the side and its bomb exploded, blowing ten men overboard. *Purdy* lost most of her power and jettisoned her torpedoes. Conned from after steering, *Purdy* limped to the

Hagushi roadstead with 13 dead and 27 wounded.

Mannert L. Abele (DD-733)* and LSM(R)-189##.

Kikusui No.2 saw the first use of the Japanese MKY7 *Ohkarocket*-boosted suicide flying bomb, and destroyer *Mannert L. Abele* was the first victim. The *Ohka* ("Cherry Blossom") was a human-guided, purpose-built flying bomb with a 2,645-pound warhead. The U.S. term for the *Ohka* was "*Baka*" (Japanese for "stupid" or "idiot"). The *Ohka* would be carried to the target area slung beneath a modified G4M Betty twin-engine bomber at high altitude. The *Ohka* would initially glide toward the target before the pilot fired the three solid-fuel booster rockets (in series or simultaneously) and hit the target at anywhere from 500 to 620 knots depending on the angle of dive. The speed of the *Ohka* made it almost impossible to hit with the anti-aircraft weapons of the time, but effectively controlling it to hit the target was a significant problem for the Japanese. *Ohka* pilots were members of the "Thunder Gods Corps."

Mannert L. Abele was operating at Radar Picket Station No. 4 northeast of Okinawa in company with *LSM(R)-189* and *LSM(R)-190* (these were medium landing ships converted to fire a barrage of unguided rockets in support of beach landings). At 1345, three Japanese Val dive-bombers commenced to attack. Two were driven off, but one on fire attempted to hit *LSM(R)-189*—it missed. At 1400, between 15 and 25 Japanese aircraft began circling *Mannert L. Abele* outside anti-aircraft range. At 1410, three Zeke fighters departed the orbit and attacked, but one was driven off and another shot down. However, the third Zeke, in smoke and flames from numerous hits, crashed into the destroyer's starboard side and penetrated the after engine room, where the plane's bomb exploded and destroyed the power plant and broke the keel. *Mannert L. Abele* lost power, went dead in the water, and was probably already done for.

About a minute after the Zeke hit *Mannert L. Abele*, an *Ohka* slammed into the ship with an explosion so powerful that her amidships section disintegrated and she broke in two, both bow and stern sections sinking rapidly. Japanese planes then bombed and strafed survivors in the water until the two LSM(R)'s shot down two of the attackers. Then, a *kamikaze* crashed into LSM(R)-189, wounding four, but she continued rescuing survivors along with LSM(R)-190. *Mannert L. Abele* suffered 84 dead and over 30 wounded. LSM(R)-189 would be awarded a Navy Unit Commendation, but would not be repaired before the end of the war. LSM(R)-190 would be sunk on 4 May.

The Japanese used at least two more *Ohka* on 12 April. As destroyer *Stanley* (DD-478) was steaming at high speed to replace *Cassin Young* at Radar Picket Station No. 1, an *Ohka* came out of a swarm of Japanese aircraft being engaged by combat air patrol and hit *Stanley* in the forward bow area. The *Ohka* passed right through the ship and exploded on the far side, mangling the bow and wounding three, but not causing enough damage to keep her from operating. Several minutes later, a second *Ohka* took aim at *Stanley*, but at the last moment, the pilot was either killed or lost control, and the *Ohka* missed high, ripping the ensign from the gaff, and impacting the ocean on the far side.



Japanese Yokosuka MXY7 Ohka ("Baka") piloted flying bomb captured intact by Marines on Okinawa. Photographed 26 June 1945 (80-G-K-5885).

Tennessee (BB-43) and Zellars (DD-777)##. In anticipation of major Japanese *kamikaze* attacks on 12 April 1945, the commander of the Gunfire and Covering Force (Task Force 54–TF 54) directed his ships to remain in an anti-aircraft disposition throughout the day. Ten battleships, four heavy cruisers, and three light cruisers steamed in a circular formation off southwestern Okinawa with 12 destroyers in an outer ring. The attack did not materialize until after 1400, showing as 11 different groups on radar. At 1450 three Jill torpedo bombers came in on the axis defended by destroyer *Zellars* at about 15 feet above the water. *Zellars* knocked down the first Jill and then the second. Despite repeated 40-mm hits, the third Jill kept coming and crashed into the destroyer's port side in the Number 2 ammunition-handling room and its bomb exploded on the starboard side of the ship, inflicting serious damage and a wall of fire. *Zellars* temporarily lost all power, but her gunners aft continued to fire and helped down another plane.

Destroyer *Bennion* (DD-662) came alongside and transferred her doctor to *Zellars* to assist with the wounded. Two of *Bennion*'s sailors jumped overboard to rescue an officer from *Zellars* who had been blown overboard and unfortunately later died from his burn wounds. *Bennion* also suffered seven wounded when a "friendly" anti-aircraft shell sprayed one of her 40-mm mounts. *Zellars*' crew put out the fires, restored power, and the destroyer made her way to Kerama Retto. The commanding officer of *Zellars*, Commander Leon S. Kintberger, was awarded a Silver Star. Kintberger had previously been awarded a Navy Cross in command of destroyer *Hoel*(DD-533) when she was lost in an heroic action against overwhelming odds in the Battle off Samar in October 1944.

More Japanese aircraft used the smoke from the burning *Zellars* to obscure their run at battleship *Tennessee*, Rear Admiral Morton Deyo's flagship (CTF 54). Gunners on *Tennessee* shot down five aircraft that got progressively closer before being

splashed, but a Val dive-bomber coming in at low altitude at the same time from a different direction made it through the gauntlet. The plane was heading right for the bridge when a last-second hit deflected it into a 40-mm mount manned by Marines (who had fired on the aircraft to the very end), killing or badly wounding all 12 Marines in the gun crew. Parts of the plane and flaming gasoline sprayed over many of the exposed gun positions before the plane came to rest by the Number 3 14-inch turret. One of the Marines escaping the flames jumped from the 40-mm mount to a 5-inch mount and then fell overboard, ending up in a large raft that had also been blown overboard. By chance, the *kamikaze* pilot's body had also ended up in this raft. The Marine was rescued three hours later. The bomb on the *kamikaze* penetrated into warrant officer country, where it exploded. *Tennessee* suffered 25 killed and 104 wounded (significantly more than she suffered when hit by a bomb at Pearl Harbor), and many of the wounded suffered horrible burns from the flaming gasoline.

The attacks on TF 54 continued into the night and many Japanese planes were shot down, but no other U.S. ships suffered serious damage. Despite the casualties and damage, *Tennessee* made emergency repairs and remained on the gun line for another two weeks before undergoing more extensive repairs at Ulithi, returning to Okinawa in June.

***Whitehurst* (DE-634).** Destroyer escort *Whitehurst* was on anti-submarine patrol southwest of Kerama Retto screening TF 54, when she was attacked simultaneously from three directions by three Japanese planes around 1500. In a by now depressingly familiar pattern, *Whitehurst's* gunners brought down two and damaged a third, but the Val crashed directly into the ship's combat information center, its bomb passing through the ship and exploding just outside on the opposite side, knocking out her forward guns. The bridge and signal bridge areas were decimated and, for a while, *Whitehurst* circled out

of control. *Vigilance* (AM-324) sped to *Whitehurst's* assistance, and many of *Whitehurst's* wounded were transferred to the minesweeper, where the provision of blood plasma saved many who would otherwise have died. As it was, 42 of *Whitehurst's* crew died and over 35 were wounded. After her crew put out the fires, *Whitehurst* was able to make Kerama Retto under her own power.

***Lindsey* (DM-32)##.** At 1450, destroyer-minesweeper *Lindsey* was attacked by seven Val dive-bombers. Her gunners scored repeated hits on the aircraft, driving off most, but two damaged Vals crashed into the ship. One of them hit forward and caused an explosion that blew the Number 1 gun turret right off the ship along with everything forward. Commanding officer Commander T. E. Chambers ordered all back full, which prevented *Lindsey* from driving herself under the water. If the forward fire room's forward bulkhead had collapsed, the ship would have been lost. With superb damage control, *Lindsey* remained afloat and was towed into Kerama Retto, but the cost was high: 56 killed and 51 wounded. *Lindsey* received a temporary bow at Guam and returned to the States, but repairs were not completed before the war ended.

***Rall* (DE-304).** While conducting an anti-submarine patrol off Okinawa in the early evening of 12 April, *Rall* was attacked by five *kamikaze*. Her gunners shot down the first *kamikaze* and a nearby cruiser shot down a fourth, but the fifth damaged and burning aircraft crashed into *Rall's* starboard side aft. The plane's 500-pound bomb tore through the ship and out the port side before exploding about 15 feet away. Then, several Japanese fighters came through and strafed the ship while damage control efforts were underway. At a cost of 21 dead and 38 wounded, the crew of *Rall* got the fires under control, brought her in to Kerama Retto, and then back to Seattle for repairs. (Previously, in November 1944, *Rall* had sunk a Japanese *Kaiten* manned torpedo that penetrated the anchorage at Ulithi.)

Despite the large-scale Japanese effort in *Kikusui* No. 2, U.S. losses fell far short of expectations (and certainly of Japanese claims), but were nonetheless painful for the U.S. Navy. Destroyer *Mannert L. Abele* and *LCS(L)-33* had been sunk. Destroyer *Zellars*, destroyer-minesweeper *Lindsey*, and *LSM-189* were out of action for the rest of the war. Battleship *Tennessee*, destroyers *Purdy* and *Cassin Young*, destroyer escorts *Rall* and *Whitehurst*, and *LCS(L)-57* were out of action for over a month. About 270 U.S. crewmen were killed and about 430 wounded.

13 April

On Friday night, U.S. Navy forces off Okinawa learned that President Franklin Roosevelt had died. For many of the young sailors in the fleet Roosevelt was the only president they had known. By order of Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal, memorial services were held on every ship in the Navy on 15 April.

14 April

***Sigsbee* (DD-502)##.** On 14 April 1945, 15 *kamikaze* came after the TF 58 and attacked destroyers on radar picket duty. One *kamikaze* hit a glancing blow on destroyer *Hunt* (DD-674) after being riddled by *Hunt's* gunners. The plane's starboard wing stuck in *Hunt's* forward funnel, her mainmast was carried away, and the aircraft's fuselage crashed on the opposite side of the ship. (*Hunt* had previously rescued 429 survivors of the carrier *Franklin* [CV-13] when she was gravely damaged 50 nautical miles off the coast of Japan on 19 March 1945.)

Five minutes after *Hunt's* close encounter, another *kamikaze* hit destroyer *Sigsbee*, blowing off the stern aft of the Number 5 5-inch gun mount, causing her to lose steering, her port shaft, and to take on a lot of water. The ship was in serious danger of sinking, settling almost to the main

deck. Her commanding officer, Commander Gordon Paiea Chung-Hoon, was given permission to scuttle the ship, but he refused, saying he could save her. As damage control parties stopped the flooding, *Sigsbee's* gunners continued to engage additional Japanese aircraft. Although *Sigsbee* only suffered four dead, 74 were wounded. *Sigsbee* was towed to Kerama Retto. Commander Chung-Hoon was awarded the Navy Cross (to go with a Silver Star received while in command of *Sigsbee* when the ship assisted in the destruction of 20 Japanese planes off Japan on 17 March 1945). Chung-Hoon would go on to be the first Asian-American to achieve flag rank in the U.S. Navy (although this was technically a "tombstone promotion" accorded to World War II officers who had distinguished themselves in battle when they retired). The *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer DDG-93, commissioned in 2004 is named in his honor.

15-16 April

The Japanese plan for *Kikusui* No. 3, scheduled for 15-16 April, included a total of 165 *kamikaze* aircraft (120 navy, 45 army), with additional aircraft in conventional strike and escort roles. The Japanese did not actually have a schedule for the mass *kamikaze* raids. Such raids were executed irregularly when enough aircraft were rounded up, with enough volunteer pilots, to get a large mass. The *Kikusui* were also about the first time in the war during which the Japanese army and navy operated in anything approaching a "joint" manner, and *Kikusui* would include formations of army and navy aircraft conducting simultaneous attacks.



USS Tennessee (BB-43) and USS Zellars (DD-777) hit by kamikaze attacks off Okinawa, 12 April 1945. Photographed from USS New Mexico (BB-40) (80-G-328600).

16 April

Intrepid (CV-11). On 15 April, with intelligence warning of *Kikusui* No. 3., TF 58 went on the offensive with large-scale fighter sweeps over Japanese airfields on Kyushu, shooting down about 30 aircraft and destroying about another 50 on the ground on 15 April, which no doubt kept the Japanese attack from being worse. The major *kamikaze* attack occurred on 16 April and some of the *kamikaze* went after TF 58 carriers, although the majority still went after the ships closer to Okinawa.

At 1336 on 16 April, two *kamikaze* made it through the gauntlet of fighters and anti-aircraft artillery fire and attacked carrier *Intrepid*. One *kamikaze* just missed hitting her flight deck and hit the water close aboard. The second crashed through the flight deck near the aft elevator, blowing a 15-by-20-foot hole in the flight deck; the engine and fuselage went into the hanger. Within 30 minutes, the fires were under control and, after three hours, aircraft recovered on the carrier. *Intrepid* suffered 10 dead and 87 wounded. The structural damage was bad enough that *Intrepid* had to proceed to Ulithi for repairs and then to San Francisco via Pearl Harbor. She was the sixth of 11 fleet carriers to be knocked out of action by Japanese *kamikaze* and air attacks.

Laffey (DD-724)##. *Kamikaze* and bomb attack, 31 dead, 72 wounded (please see attachment H-045-1).

Bryant (DD-665)##. Destroyer *Bryant* was on Radar Picket Station No. 2 when she received word of the mass attack on *Laffey*. The commanding officer, Commander George Seay, did not hesitate to speed toward *Laffey* to render assistance, damage control teams at the ready. At 0934, six planes made a coordinated attack on *Bryant*. First, three Zeke fighters came in. One was shot down by a friendly fighter, another by *Bryant's* gunners, but the third, battered and trailing smoke, hit the destroyer at the base of her bridge, wiping out the combat information center and main radio. Then, the bomb exploded, knocking out the radars, communications, and surrounding the bridge in flames. Even with the interior of the bridge on fire and exploding ammunition outside, Seay remained on the bridge directing damage control and continued engagement of Japanese aircraft. *Bryant's* crew got the fires under control in about 30 minutes and, with word that other ships were standing by *Laffey*, *Bryant* made her way to Kerama Retto with 34 dead and 33 wounded. She returned to the San Francisco for repairs that were not completed before the war ended. Commander Seay would be awarded a Silver Star.

Pringle (DD-477)* and Hobson (DM-26, formerly DD-464)##. Destroyer *Pringle*, destroyer-minesweeper *Hobson* and medium landing ship *LSM-191* were at Radar Picket Station No. 14 northwest of Okinawa when three Val *kamikaze* came in on attack at 0910 on 16 April. *Pringle* shot down two of them, but the third made a direct hit on the bridge and crashed through the superstructure all the way to the base of the forward stack, where the 1,000-pound bomb (or two 500-pound bombs) exploded, breaking the keel and severing the ship in two. Both halves sank in less than five minutes, taking 62 men to the bottom. Other ships rescued 258 crewmen, of whom 110 were wounded and three

subsequently died. The skipper, Lieutenant Commander John Kelley, survived and was awarded a Silver Star.

Two minutes after *Pringle* was hit, a *kamikaze* attacked destroyer-minesweeper *Hobson*. A hit from a 5-inch shell at point-blank range obliterated the aircraft, but the plane's bomb hit the ship in the after deck house, apparently with a delayed fuse. The bomb detonated, destroying workshops and blowing a hole in the deck over the forward fireroom, knocking out steam and power lines. As damage control teams fought the fires, two more planes came in for attack and were shot down by *Hobson's* gunners. Once the situation was under control, *Hobson* rescued 136 of *Pringle's* 258 survivors and *LSM-191* and another unidentified gunboat rescued the rest. *Hobson* suffered four dead and eight wounded. She was able to reach Kerama Retto on her own and then ultimately headed for Norfolk for repairs that weren't finished before the war ended. *Hobson's* skipper, Commander Joseph I. Manning, was awarded a Navy Cross. (*Hobson* was rammed and sunk by the carrier *Wasp* [CV-18] on 26 April 1952 with the loss of 171 of her crew in the worst accidental loss of life in the U.S. Navy since World War II.)

Bowers (DE-637)##. Destroyer escort *Bowers* was an antisubmarine patrol west of Okinawa at dawn when she shot down a Japanese plane. At 0930, two more came in to attack at low altitude. *Bowers* attempted radical maneuvers—to no avail as the aircraft split to attack her from different directions. *Bowers'* forward guns shot down one plane directly ahead. The second actually passed over the ship from behind and then looped over and crashed into the bridge from ahead, spraying flaming gasoline all over the bridge and pilot house, and severely wounding the commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander S. A. Haavik. The plane's bomb penetrated into the superstructure and exploded. Damage control teams fought the fires for 45 minutes before bringing them under control. *Bowers* suffered 48 dead and 56

wounded, but was able to reach the Hagushi anchorage under her own power, and then to Philadelphia. Repairs and conversion to a high-speed transport were incomplete when the war ended.

Harding (DM-28, formerly DD-625)#. Destroyer-minesweeper *Harding* was en route to relieve *Hobson* on Radar Picket Station No. 14, when she was attacked by four Japanese aircraft just before 1000. The first plane broke off in the face of intense anti-aircraft fire and the second was shot down. The third ran the gauntlet and almost hit *Harding's* bridge before crashing close aboard. The plane's bomb exploded and blew a 20-by-10-foot gash from her keel to the main deck, bending her keel. *Harding* was able steam backward to Kerama Retto, having suffered 22 dead and ten wounded. Although she returned to Norfolk, she was not fully repaired. *Harding's* commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander Donald B. Ramage, was awarded a Silver Star.

LCS(L)-116. Large support landing craft *LCS(L)-116* was operating about six miles east of *Laffey* when the destroyer was attacked (see attachment H-045-1).

Kikusui No. 3 succeeded in sinking the destroyer *Pringle*, putting the destroyers *Bryant* and *Laffey*, destroyer-minesweepers *Hobson* and *Harding*, and destroyer escort *Bowers* out of action for the duration of the war. Carrier *Intrepid* was also put out of action for over 30 days. About 225 U.S. crewmembers were killed and about 390 wounded.

17 April

At 2305, while operating east of Okinawa, battleship *Missouri's* radar detected a surfaced contact 12 nautical miles from the carrier task group. Escort carrier *Bataan* (CVE-29) and five destroyers formed a hunter-killer group.

Heermann (DD-532), repaired and still under the command of Commander Amos Hathaway after her heroic action in the Battle off Samar (for which Hathaway received a Navy Cross), along with *Uhlmann* (DD-697), *Collet* (DD-730), *McCord* (DD-534), and *Mertz* (DD-691), conducted multiple attacks. The contact was assessed to be *I-56*, one of the *Tatara* Group of *Kaiten* submarines that departed Japan on 28 March. *I-56* was lost with all 116 hands plus six *Kaiten* pilots.

18 April

Medium landing ship *LSM-28* was damaged as a result of Japanese air attack, but suffered no casualties. However, the vessel was out of action for more than 30 days.

20 April

The sixth *Kaiten* submarine group deployed from Japan was the *Tembu* ("Heavenly Warrior") Group. It consisted of *I-47*, which departed 20 April, and *I-36*, which departed 22 April, each with six *Kaiten* manned suicide torpedoes embarked.

22 April

***Isherwood* (DD-520)##.** Destroyer *Isherwood* was protecting the Hagushi anchorage area at dusk on 22 April, when a lone Val dive-bomber came out of the setting sun and crashed into the Number 3 5-inch gun mount and the plane's bomb detonated, starting numerous fires. Damage control parties fought the fires for 25 minutes, getting all under control except for one in the depth-charge rack aft. A depth charge exploded, setting off the other depth charges in a large explosion, which severely damaged the aft end of the ship and the after engine room. Casualties were heavy as a result of the *kamikaze* hit and the depth-charge explosion, with 42 dead and 41 wounded. *Isherwood* was brought into Kerama Retto for emergency repair and later she steamed

to San Francisco, where her repairs were not completed until just after the war ended.

LCS(L)-15*. At 1830, a *kamikaze* made a direct hit on large support landing craft *LCS(S)-15* and the plane's bomb exploded, sinking the vessel in three minutes. *LCS(L)-15* lost 15 crewmen and suffered 11 wounded.

***Swallow* (AM-65)*.** At 1858, a *kamikaze* burst out of low clouds and hit the minesweeper *Swallow* on her starboard side amidships at the waterline. Both engine rooms immediately flooded and the ship was listing 45 degrees at 1901, when the abandon ship order was given. *Swallow* capsized and sank three minutes later. She suffered two dead and nine wounded.

25 April

The Japanese deployed another conventional submarine, *RO-109*, to the Okinawa area in mid-April. Destroyer-transport *Horace A. Bass* (APD-124), Lieutenant Commander F. W. Kuhn in command, was escorting a 17-ship convoy from Guam to Okinawa when she picked up a sonar contact at 1,250 yards at 1804. The ship dropped five depth charges while the submarine commenced evasive maneuvers and attempted to jam her sonar with well-tuned sound impulses. Contact was lost after the depth-charge explosions, but then regained, and *Horace A. Bass* dropped five more depth charges. This time, the submarine went deep and appeared to use sonar decoys that generated multiple false targets, which may have been a German "Bold"-type decoy. *Horace A. Bass* made six more attacks and, after the last one shortly after 2000, debris and oil came to the surface. This was assessed to be *RO-109*, lost with all 65 hands.

27-28 April

The fourth Japanese mass *kamikaze* attack, *Kikusui* No. 4, included 115 *kamikaze* (65 navy and 50 army aircraft), along with additional conventional strike and escort aircraft.

27 April

Japanese submarine *I-36*, which had departed Japan on 22 April as part of the *Tembu Kaitenn* Group, sighted a 28-ship convoy (a mix of LSTs and LSMs) east of Okinawa. *I-36* closed on the convoy intending to launch four *Kaiten* manned suicide torpedoes, but two malfunctioned and only two were launched. Destroyer-transport *Ringness* (APD-100) sighted a torpedo wake at 0832 and a periscope, and then two more torpedo wakes. Destroyer escort *Fieberling* (DE-460) sighted another torpedo wake. No ships were hit and *I-36* escaped. There was no way to recover a *Kaiten*, so those were one-way missions for the pilots whether they hit or missed.

***Hutchins* (DD-476)#.** U.S. Navy ships continued to provide extensive gunfire support to U.S. Army and Marine forces ashore on Okinawa throughout the campaign, with the risk of attack by suicide boat an ever-present danger. Many suicide boats were destroyed in “flycatcher” operations, but, on 27 April, one got close enough to the destroyer *Hutchins* for the boat’s charge to do major damage. No one on *Hutchins* was killed or wounded. However, damage to the hull and machinery was extensive and she was brought in to Kerama Retto for emergency repairs, and then to Bremerton, where repairs were never completed.

***Rathburne* (APD-25)#.** The World War I-vintage destroyer *Rathburne*, converted to a fast destroyer-transport, was patrolling in the Hagushi anchorage area on 27 April, when she detected an incoming aircraft on her radar. Maneuver and gunfire failed to stop the *kamikaze* from hitting

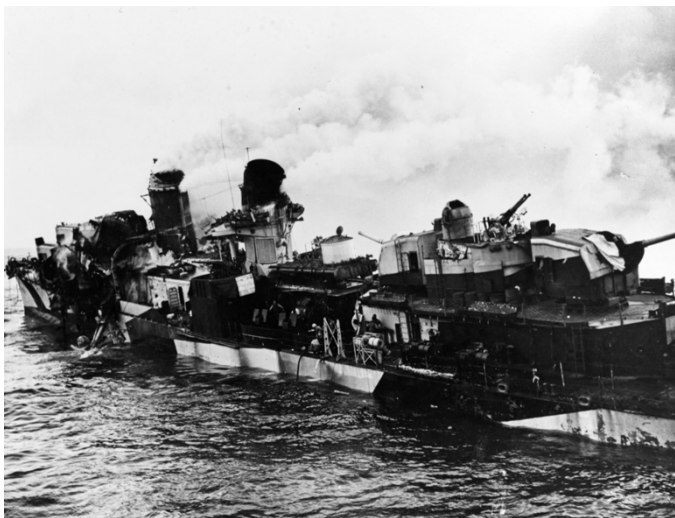
the port bow at the waterline. Luckily, no crewmen were killed or wounded, but a number of compartments were flooded and fires broke out, all of which were brought under control. *Rathburne* made it to Kerama Retto for emergency repairs and then to San Diego, where repairs were not completed. (*Rathburne* was actually named after John Rathbun, John Paul Jones’ first lieutenant, but the name was misspelled at commissioning in 1918. The *Knox*-class frigate *Rathburne* [FF-1057], in service 1970-92, perpetuated the misspelling, being named after the first *Rathburne*.)

Canada Victory*. The merchant ship *Canada Victory*, reconfigured to carry ammunition, was off the Hagushi beachhead on 27 April when a *kamikaze* crashed into her stern, causing a large explosion in hold Number 5 and causing her to sink in ten minutes with 12 killed and 27 wounded. Fortunately, there was no catastrophic explosion in the roadstead. The loss of *Canada Victory*, along with the earlier sinkings of ammunition ships *Logan Victory* and *Hobbs Victory*, had significant adverse impact on the ground campaign. Among the 24,000 tons of lost ammunition were almost all the 8-mm mortar shells that were vital in hitting Japanese troops otherwise protected on the reverse slopes of fortified ridges.

28 April

***Pinkney* (APH-2)##.** The evacuation transport *Pinkney* had been off the Hagushi beachhead for several days as casualties were brought on board from the fighting ashore and ships hit by *kamikaze*. At 1730 on 28 April, *Pinkney* was hit in on the aft side of her superstructure by a *kamikaze* spotted only moments before. Sixteen patients were killed in the initial explosion and the rest were evacuated despite a raging fire and ammunition cooking off. The crew fought the fire and threw live ammunition over the side as tugs and landing craft came alongside to fight the fires

and evacuate the wounded. The ship listed heavily to port while fires burned out all the medical wards and took three hours to put out. *Pinkney* lost 18 of her own crew with another 12 wounded, but kept the ship from sinking. She sailed for San Francisco, but repairs were not complete before the war ended. (*Pinkney* was one of three *Tryon*-class evacuation transports, which were modified personnel transports with extensive medical facilities. The armed ships, which did not have Geneva Convention protection as hospital ships, operated as assault transports on the way to a landing and then as hospital ships to evacuate wounded while the landing was underway. The ships carried 8-12 doctors and 60 hospital corpsmen (no nurses), could transport 1,150 patients, and had 300 intensive-care beds for severely wounded, two main operating rooms, and two "overflow" surgeries.)



USS Hazelwood (DD-531) after being hit by a kamikaze off Okinawa, 29 April 1945 (80-G-187592).

USS *Comfort* (AH-6) and *Awa Maru*

Comfort (AH-6). On the evening of 28 April, the hospital ship *Comfort* had departed Okinawa fully loaded with wounded and was 50 nautical miles southeast of the island and heading for Saipan. *Comfort* was fully lit and carried large red cross markings in accordance with the Geneva Convention. Moreover, the moon was full. At

2041, a Japanese plane first made a close pass at masthead height and then made a 360-degree turn and dove into *Comfort*'s amidships superstructure. It penetrated through three decks into the surgery, killing all the medical personnel and patients there. (Unlike most other Navy hospital ships, *Comfort* was one of three 700-bed hospital ships manned and operated by the Navy for the U.S. Army; the medical staff were all Army personnel). Two sailors and 21 Army personnel, including six Army nurses, plus seven patients were killed. Seven Sailors, 31 Army personnel (including four nurses), and ten patients were wounded. Topside damage was considerable, but the engineering spaces were unaffected, so *Comfort* was able to continue on to Guam and then Los Angeles for repairs. Navy hospital ships *Relief* (AH-1) and *Solace* (AH-5) were also attacked by Japanese planes off Okinawa in April 1945, but *Comfort* was the only one to suffer damage or casualties.

There is some evidence, and a lot of speculation, that the attack on *Comfort* (and possibly on the other hospital ships) was deliberate retaliation for the sinking of a Japanese-declared Red Cross ship, *Awa Maru*, by the submarine *Queenfish* (SS-393) on 1 April, which resulted in the loss of all but one of 2,004 people aboard. The Japanese claimed it to be "the most outrageous act of treachery unparalleled in the history of world war" and, in a radio Tokyo broadcast on 9 April, stated that "We are justified in bombing hospital ships as they are being used as repair ships for returning wounded men back to the fighting front." A document recovered from the dead *kamikaze* pilot had a list of U.S. ships off Okinawa, including two hospital ships.

The 11,600-ton *Awa Maru* was designed as a passenger ship, but was requisitioned by the Japanese navy when it was completed in 1943. The ship made several convoy runs in 1944 transporting military cargo, and was even beached after it had been hit by torpedo from a U.S. submarine wolfpack on the night of 18-19

August 1944. The ship was recovered and repaired, and, in 1945, was declared under the terms of the "Relief for POWs Agreement" as a Red Cross relief ship carrying humanitarian supplies to U.S. and Allied POWs in Japanese control.

After completing a relief run to Singapore in March 1945, *Awa Maru* then took onboard about 1,700 Japanese merchant sailors (survivors of previous sinkings), as well as a number of military personnel, diplomats, and civilians. It also took on a cargo of rubber, metal (nickel, lead, tin—accounts vary), and possibly sugar, but definitely no Red Cross supplies. The ship was also rumored to have loaded an extremely valuable cargo of gold and other precious materials. These were the result of years of "treasure hunting," in Asia (the ship was also rumored to be carrying fossilized remains of "Peking Man," the 750,000-year-old *Homo erectus*, one of the earliest finds of *Homo sapiens's* ancestors). Regardless, the Japanese declared *Awa Maru* as a Red Cross ship and, as required, provided the track to the Allies. On 28 March, Vice Admiral Charles A. Lockwood, the commander of Submarine Force Pacific (SUBPAC), sent a message to all U.S. submarines not to sink it. The SUBPAC message was notably lacking in specifics, beyond the dates of March 30 to 4 April for the transit from Singapore to Japan. The message did note that *Awa Maru* would be lighted at night and "plastered with white crosses." However, as *Awa Maru* transited the Taiwan Strait at night and in dense fog on 1 April, *Queenfish* mistook the ship for a destroyer and sank her with four torpedoes.

Queenfish rescued one Japanese survivor, the captain's steward (who was also the sole survivor of two previous sinkings), who revealed that the ship was *Awa Maru*. The skipper of *Queenfish*, Commander Charles E. Loughlin (who had been awarded two Navy Crosses and a Silver Star for his first three war patrols on *Queenfish*—this was the fourth for sub and skipper), immediately reported the sinking. CNO Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King

ordered an immediate return to port for *Queenfish* and relief from command and general court-martial for Loughlin. Although the *Awa Maru* was not in use as a hospital ship or carrying relief supplies (or sounding its foghorn as required), these facts were deemed irrelevant as it was under declared Red Cross protection and orders had been given not to sink it.

The court-martial dismissed the charge of "culpable inefficiency in the performance of duty and disobeying the lawful order of a superior," but found Loughlin guilty of "negligence," with a punishment of a Secretary of the Navy Letter of Admonition. Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz determined this to be too lenient and sent Letters of Reprimand to the Board members (a higher punishment than given to Loughlin—it would be interesting to see what JAGs would think of that today). King ordered that Loughlin not be given another command, which was apparently forgotten after the war as Loughlin went on to command *Mississenewa* (AO-144) and *Toledo* (CA-133) before making rear admiral and commanding Submarine Flotilla 6. He finished his career in 1968 as the Commandant of the Washington Naval District. An extensive search of the *Awa Maru* wreck (found in 1977) by China in 1980 found no treasure.

Awa Maru was one of 24 hospital ships sunk by hostile action during World War II (one Japanese hospital ship sank due to a collision), three of which were sunk in the Pacific Theater. On 14 May 1943, the Japanese submarine *I-177* sank the Australian hospital ship *Centaur*, which went down in a matter of minutes with the loss of 268 of 332 aboard. *I-177* was sunk with all hands by *Samuel S. Miles* (DE-183) on 3 October 1943 with all 101 hands. However, the skipper who sank *Centaur* had transferred and survived the war. A war crimes trial was unable to prove he knowingly sank a hospital ship, but he did admit to machine-gunning survivors in the water on three previous occasions in command of a different submarine and was convicted of that.

On 27 November 1943, the Japanese hospital ship *Buenos Aires Maru* was hit by a bomb and sunk by a probable U.S. Army B-24 four-engine bomber. Although reportedly an accident, *Buenos Aires Maru* was well marked, the plane was only at 300 feet altitude, and the Japanese claimed it strafed survivors. The Japanese rescued about 1,000 survivors, but 158 were lost, including some number of Japanese nurses (63 were on board). The Southwest Pacific Theater command surgeon recommended that the United States apologize for the sinking, but General Douglas MacArthur refused and no apology was ever given. *Buenos Aires Maru* had also been previously hit and damaged by a torpedo from submarine *Runner* (SS-275) on 25 April 1943, and nothing untoward seems to have happened to the skipper as he made rear admiral (*Runner* was lost with all hands on 26 June 1943). The last hospital ship sunk in the Pacific was the Japanese *Hikawa Maru No. 2* (a former Dutch hospital ship captured by the Japanese) that was sunk by a scuttling charge on 14 August 1945.

Kikusan No. 4 didn't accomplish much for the Japanese. The ammunition ship *Canada Victory* was sunk, along with some much-needed ammunition. The destroyer *Hutchins* and destroyer-transport *Rathburne* were saved by their crews, but were too damaged to repair. The evacuation transport *Pinkney* and hospital ship *Comfort* were seriously damaged. U.S. casualties were 77 dead and 87 wounded. The dead included 27 Army personnel, among them six nurses and ten patients, aboard *Comfort*.

29 April

***Haggard* (DD-555)#.** On the late afternoon of 29 April, TF 58 destroyer *Haggard* had just joined *Uhlmann* (DD-687) on a radar picket station when Japanese aircraft attacked. One Zeke kamikaze was taken under fire by both *Uhlman* and *Haggard*. Hit repeatedly, the Zeke crashed into *Haggard* amidships at the waterline at 1657. After

a delay, the plane's bomb exploded, and the forward engine room and both fire rooms flooded and the ship was in danger of sinking. Another Zeke made an attack run and was shot down by *Uhlmann*, crashing just short of *Haggard*. As *Haggard* jettisoned torpedoes and depth charges, *Uhlmann* rescued two of *Haggard's* crew, who had been blown overboard. Damage control teams on *Haggard* prevented progressive flooding, as *Uhlmann* radioed for back-up and combat air patrol arrived overhead, followed an hour later by the anti-aircraft light cruiser *San Diego* (CL-53) and destroyer *Walker* (DD-517). Fortunately, the sea was relatively calm and *Walker* towed *Haggard* to Kerama Retto. *Haggard's* casualties were 11 killed and 40 wounded. Due to the number of damaged ships at Kerama Retto, it took until 18 June before she was able to get underway for San Diego. Due to the extent of damage, she was scrapped instead of being repaired.

Haggard and *Uhlmann* had teamed up previously to sink Japanese submarine *RO-41*, which had been sent out to intercept the Fast Carrier Task Force strikes on Japan on 18/19 March. As TG 58.4 was exiting the area to the south, *Haggard* and *Uhlmann* gained radar contact at 25,000 yards and the two destroyers were ordered to investigate. After the contact submerged, *Haggard* gained sonar contact and, while *Uhlmann* provided over watch, *Haggard* dropped depth charges. Just before midnight, the submarine broached just off *Haggard's* port beam. *Haggard* opened up with 40-mm fire, damaging the submarine's conning tower, before *Haggard's* skipper, Lieutenant Commander V. J. Soballe, gave the order to ram the submarine. *Haggard* smashed her bow, but the submarine rolled over and sank with "explosions of gratifying violence." *RO-41* was lost with all 82 hands. *Uhlmann* escorted *Haggard* to Ulithi for repairs.

***Hazelwood* (DD-531).** As destroyer *Hazelwood* was steaming to assist *Haggard* on 29 April, three Zekes dropped out of the overcast. *Hazelwood*

shot down one, which crashed close aboard, and the other Zeke missed. The third Zeke came in from astern. Although hit multiple times, it clipped the portside of the aft stack and then crashed into the bridge from behind, toppling the mainmast, knocking out the forward guns, and spraying flaming gasoline all over the forward superstructure. Its bomb exploded, killing the commanding officer, Commander Volkert P. Douw, and many others, including Douw's prospective relief, Lieutenant Commander Walter Hering, and the executive officer and ship's doctor.

The engineering officer, Lieutenant (j.g.) Chester M. Locke, took command of *Hazelwood* and directed the crew in firefighting and care of the wounded. Twenty-five wounded men had been gathered on the forecastle when ammunition began cooking off. Because of the danger of imminent explosion, the destroyer *McGowan* (DD-678) could not come alongside close aboard. The wounded were put in life jackets, lowered to the water, and able-bodied men dove in and swam them to *McGowan*. Only one of the wounded men died in the process. *Hazelwood's* crew got the fires out in about two hours and *McGowan* took her in tow until the next morning, when *Hazelwood* was able to proceed to Kerama Retto under her own power and, from there, to the West Coast for repairs. Although Morison gives a casualty count as 42 killed and 26 wounded, multiple other sources state 10 officers and 67 enlisted men were killed and 36 were wounded. Locke was awarded a Navy Cross.

LCS(L)-37.# Large support landing craft *LCS(S)-37* was damaged by a Japanese suicide boat on 28 April. Four men were wounded and the damage was deemed beyond economical repair. She was scuttled over the Philippine Trench in March 1946.

On the afternoon of 29 April, a VC-92 TBM Avenger off *Tulagi* (CVE-72), piloted by Lieutenant (j.g.) Donald Davis, sighted a submarine on the surface. From 4,000 feet, he dove on the contact

and dropped a depth bomb that exploded alongside the conning tower as the submarine was crash-diving. Circling back for another pass, Davis dropped a Mark 24 Fido acoustic homing torpedo that exploded against the submarine's hull. That was the end of *I-44*, one of the *Tatara* Group of *Kaiten* submarines that had deployed from Japan on 28 March. All 130 crewmen and four *Kaiten* pilots were lost.

30 April

Terror (CM-5). Throughout the Okinawa operation, the minelayer *Terror* served as flagship and tender for the Mine Flotilla (Rear Admiral Alexander Sharp) at Kerama Retto. (The 5,900-ton *Terror* was the only U.S. ship built specifically for minelaying during World War II—other U.S. minelayers were converted destroyers.) During April, *Terror's* crew went to general quarters 93 times. In the pre-dawn hours of 1 May, a lone *kamikaze* found its way through the smoke screen and caught *Terror* at anchor. Coming in from the starboard quarter so fast, only one gun on *Terror* was able to open fire before the plane crashed into the communications platform and one of two bombs exploded. The other bomb penetrated the main deck before exploding and the plane's engine crashed into the wardroom. The large fire was under control quickly, but casualties were high: 48 dead and 123 wounded. *Terror's* damage was extensive enough that she had to return to the States.

1 May

Kaiten submarine *I-47* (of the *Tembu* Group) reported that it attacked a convoy, firing four conventional torpedoes from 4,300 yards and hearing three explosions. At 0900 on 2 May, *I-47* sighted a 10,000-ton tanker with two escorting destroyers heading toward Okinawa. At 1100, the submarine launched *Kaiten* No. 1 and *Kaiten* No. 4, and reported two heavy explosions. *I-47* sonar

then detected two *Fletcher*-class destroyers and she launched *Kaiten* No. 2, which was followed by a heavy explosion. *I-47* escaped the area, but no ships were hit and the explosions were most likely the *Kaiten* self-destructing. On 7 May, *I-47* launched another *Kaiten* at a British *Leander*-class cruiser, but the remaining two *Kaiten* couldn't be launched due to malfunctions, so the submarine was ordered to return to port. None of her targets was hit. (Actually, I can't find what the targets really were).

H-Gram 046 will continue with *Kikusui* No. 5 and beyond.

Sources include: NHC *Dictionary of American Fighting Ships* (DANFS) for U.S. ships and combinedfleet.com for Japanese ships; *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Vol. XIV: Victory in the Pacific*, by Samuel Eliot Morison (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1960); *Too Close for Comfort*, by Dale P. Harper (Bloomington, IN: Trafford Publishing, 2001); *Silent Victory*, by Clay Blair (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippencott, 1975); *Ghost of War: The Sinking of the Awa Maru and Japanese-American Relations, 1945-1995*, by Roger Dingman (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997); *Kamikaze: To Die for the Emperor*, by Peter C. Smith (Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword Aviation, 2014).