

THE NEXT GENERATION

By: John Hagerty, son of survivor Ed Hagerty:

There it was, down in the basement: an old framed black and white photo of a navy ship. Growing up, that framed photo never elicited much curiosity within me. It hung on the wall, a memory to which I had little knowledge and felt no connection. I wasn't even clear what type of ship it was. To my young eyes, the angle of the flight deck sort of looked like a big gun.

Oh sure, I was aware that my father served on a navy ship in the war. I had heard that he was the guy who drove the ship (since I didn't know what a helmsman was, I figured the guy turning that big wheel in the bridge must be "driving" the ship). But as a youngster I asked few questions and he volunteered little information.

Looking back, I now recognize the hints my father dropped that something remarkable had happened on that odd-looking ship in the fading photograph. I remember he once described the "whooshing" sound made by the massive shells fired by naval guns as they screamed towards their target, getting louder and louder. I was too young to wonder how he would know of such a thing. I was horrified when he once remarked that some of the guys who jumped off the ship forgot to take off their helmets, thus breaking their necks when they hit the surface. "Why would they jump off the ship?" I wondered to myself. But I didn't ask and he didn't elaborate.

I don't remember the first time I read of the Battle of Leyte Gulf. Unfortunately, the name doesn't resonate in American history like Midway or Gettysburg or Yorktown. The battle with its four very separate engagements is too confusing and has too many varied elements to stir the soul of the casual history reader. That is a shame, because the amazing fight of Taffy III against utterly hopeless odds is one of the most remarkable stories in American military history.

I was in grade school when my father packed all of us (mom and six young kids) into the station wagon and drove halfway across the country to Annapolis for the USS Gambier Bay & VC-10 reunion. I was too young to glean the full significance of this group of men and the bond that pulled them together. They all seemed to be about the age of my pals' parents. I didn't pay attention to their talk. I didn't understand. I wanted to see the ocean.

Finally, as a junior high student, I read Herman Wouk's War and Remembrance, with its superb account of the Battle of Leyte Gulf. Now the pieces fell in place. As I read other military accounts of the battle, a picture of what my father went through, along with those guys I had met at the reunion, emerged. It was heroic and horrific – the sort of thing that happened to John Wayne and Robert Mitchum in the movies, not regular folks like my dad and his buddies that I had met in Annapolis.

I'm not sure why, but the more I learned about the battle and the heroic death of the Gambier Bay, the more I figured I should not ask my father about it, thus forcing him to relive the horror. Instead I asked my grandmother. She, of course, had been forced to wait those agonizing days after the ship went down, not knowing if her 19-year-old son had gone down with it. When they were finally reunited, the excited young man poured out to his mom the entire story of the battle, the sight of enemy warships pouring horribly destructive shells onto his ship, the death of the tiny carrier and those harrowing days spent in the water with his fellow survivors. My grandmother had been anxiously waiting for the day when I would ask what happened. She related the story with images and details that I never heard from my father. As I listened, the horror and amazement that I felt was mixed with something else: pride.

With each passing year there are fewer and fewer people left to tell the remarkable story of the USS

Gambier Bay. We are incredibly fortunate that the sailors and airmen who survived the ordeal have taken major steps to preserve the memory. Certainly, the rest of us can never fully grasp the bond forged by battle, survival, and ultimately, victory. They carry that bond to the grave.

Unlike that photo in the basement as I was growing up, the story of the final battle of the Gambier Bay is one that should never be allowed to fade. The men who were there have done their part, and may of them continue to do so. But now it is time for those of us in the “second generation” to climb aboard and report to our stations. There is much that can and should be done to preserve the memory of the gallant fight waged by the Gambier Bay against hopeless odds. Like The Charge of the Light Brigade, it is a story that can not help but stir the soul and arouse the deepest pride.

I encourage every member of the “second generation” of Gambier Bay and VC-10 survivors, as well as anyone who appreciates the amazing thing they did on a gray, rainy day in late October of 1944, to join the USS Gambier Bay (CVE-73) & Composite Squadron VC-10 Association. Volunteer your talents to help keep alive the memory.