

The Tale of Two CVE's

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"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; yes, it was the epoch of belief."

CVE-63-VC42, VC65 was laid down as USS Chopin Bay; renamed the USS Midway on 3 April 1943; renamed the USS St. Lo on 15 September 1944.

CVE-73-VC10 was laid down as ACV-73 Hull Number 19 December 1943 and named the USS Gambier Bay.

They journeyed and fought together at Saipan, Tinian, Eniwetok, Manus, and Palau and joined the 7th Fleet in September 1944 under the command of Admiral Kinkaid. In early October 1944, they became a part of Task Unit 77.4.3 known as Taffy III under the command of Admiral Sprague.

On about the 12th of October 1944, they departed Manus Harbor and headed for the Philippines, arriving there on 20 October. Americans had landed on the Leyte beaches, and the CVE's 63 and 73 were there to provide air cover for the invasion, for MacArthur had returned.

On 21, 22, 23 October, things went rather smoothly and on 24 October, the Japanese made a major attack against the Americans in Leyte Gulf- the Battle of Surigao Strait had begun and our pilots were put on alert.

October 25, 1944 and the call to General Quarters at 0430. At 0630, we were secured from General Quarters, but only to be called back at 0644 - hardly time for coffee and breakfast. Dawn was at 0627, no sunrise. It was a misty morning, gray and overcast.

About the same time, Yamato's look outs, more than 150 feet high in the crow's nest and able to see 20 miles, cried out "masts on the horizon" - not just masts, but the shapes and silhouettes of aircraft carriers. They couldn't believe that we would be foolish enough to come within the range of Yamato's guns.

Admiral Kurita was convinced they had stumbled upon one of Halsey's carrier groups. Little did he know he had run into "The Little Giants." Kurita sends a message to his headquarters: "By heaven sent opportunity, like a gift from the gods, we are dashing to attack the enemy carriers, our first objective is to destroy the flight decks, and then the task force."

About the same time, our patrol pilots radioed, "Enemy surface Force - 4 battleships, 8 cruisers, and 11 destroyers 20 miles northwest closing in at 30 knots, pagoda masks, "the largest red meatball flag I've ever seen flying over the largest battleship I've ever seen."

Taffy III with its 6 CVE's, 4 destroyers escorts, and 3 destroyers had encountered the Centre Force of the Japanese Navy under the command of Admiral Kurita. It was their 18" guns vs. our 5" guns, but we had our pilots and their bombs and our Escorts with their torpedoes. Admiral Sprague had ordered the launch of our aircraft.

The Battle off Samar was now on.

October 25 was fittingly the anniversary day of the Battle of Balaclava (1854) in the Crimean War, memorialized in Tennyson's poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade." It was also St Crispin's Day, but there was no King Henry to inspire. "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers for he today that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother." There were many brothers during the next 2-1/2 hours. With much courage and sacrifice.

"They are shooting in Technicolor," one sailor shouted as the great geysers of colored water were marching very close to the CVE-73 USS Gambier Bay. At approximately 0810, they found the range and set fire to the aft flight deck, and about 10 minutes later an 8" shell exploded in the forward engine room - she was now defenseless, 3 other cruisers join in for the kill. The USS Gambier Bay is hit every other minute for the next hour, and at approximately 0850 abandon ship was ordered, and shortly after 0900, it was sunk and out of sight. For the survivors, the next few days would be a bitter challenge.

The constant assault by our carrier borne aircraft, their relentless pursuit with their bombs and guns, and the determination, courage and accuracy of our Escorts with their torpedoes were taking its toll on Admiral Kurita's ships, and no doubt weighed heavily in his decision to regroup.

They were soon to learn of Taffy III's audacious resistance, the effectiveness of which no tactician could ever have foreseen, and no statistician could have measured.

Kurita wasn't sure how the battle was progressing or what they were truly up against, and he really thought he had been tricked into a trap. Between the battle of 24 October and now this battle, he had already lost half of his fleet. In the last two hours, he had 4 cruisers so badly damaged that they

had to drop out of the battle. He faced the real prospect that if he continued this running battle, perhaps none of his warships would return home.

Therefore, at approximately 0930, 25 October 1944, Admiral Kurita gave the order for the fleet to reassemble around Yamato; they then headed north away from Taffy III and away from Leyte Gulf as well. The mighty Centre Force was going home.

Admiral Sprague could not believe what he was seeing. At the beginning of the Battle, he feared he would make history by being the Commander of the first carriers ever destroyed by naval gunfire, now he was making history as the victor in the most unlikely win in U.S. Naval history.

Around 10:00 A.M., the carrier group of Taffy III still celebrating its narrow escape from Kurita's gunships, and having been at General Quarters for 3 hours, they were wrung out and giddy over their good luck. The men of CVE-63 USS St. Lo had been given a condition one easy allowing half of the crew to stand down from general quarters and get a cup of coffee.

However, this was short lived. Shortly before 1100, Taffy III came under the wholesale Kamikaze attack. The Japanese Army Air Corps had debuted this horrific new mode of warfare earlier that morning.

Few men aboard the St. Lo saw the plane hit their ship- for half the crew was still enjoying a breather. The zero fighter with a bomb under each wing plunged into the flight deck. This set off a series of terrific explosions, shattering several planes, blowing hangar doors from their hinges, setting several planes on fire, and throwing men overboard. After several more of these powerful explosions, the ship was ripped apart, and thus the order to abandon ship. She was gone in 29 minutes.

The survivors of CVE-63 USS St Lo were picked up by our Escorts during the next couple of hours. The cost of life was dear.

The survivors of CVE-73 USS Gambier Bay were now forming groups of various sizes along with the other survivors of the Hoel, Johnston and Samuel B. Roberts.

The spot where the USS Gambier Bay was sunk, the ocean is about 7 miles deep. The waters are warm, but after dark, it is cold enough to give you hypothermia. The badly wounded were placed on rafts and/or floater nets along

with some officers. The rest were floating in their "Mae West" Kapoks and CO2 life belts.

Shortly after noon on October 25, an avenger torpedo plane flew low overhead and dipped its wings. We now felt for sure it wouldn't be too long before help would be on its way.

We had no food or water, and not having drinking water would soon become a serious problem. By mid-afternoon, the sharks had made their appearance. Thank God they never attacked the group at large. As night was beginning to fall, we started to shiver and some began to pray. A ship approached, and we began to shout and yell, but then we realized it was a Japanese destroyer laden with men from a sunken Japanese cruiser. It came within a 100 yards of us. They did not open fire on us.

As the first night deepened, optimism of a quick rescue was turning into discouragement. But there was still hope, and to keep our spirits up, we sang some songs- "Deep in the Heart of Texas," "I've Been Working on the Railroad," etc. But much suffering had been endured, and thus the singing didn't last very long. We also wondered what had happened to our shipmates.

The random strikes by the sharks terrified us through the night. Exhaustion was taking its toll. Men would fall asleep; drift off, never to be seen again. The night seemed to last forever.

Morning of the second day - surely they would find us and rescue us soon. Still no food or water. We looked around the horizon- nothing.

The Kapoks were beginning to lose their buoyancy. Most of us, however, also had our CO2 life belts and thus could stay afloat.

Thirst was a serious problem. Those who drank the sea water often became delirious. Some would say they were going for a beer, others stated they were swimming ashore, and others would see their relatives waving at them. They would disappear never to be seen again.

The second day was bright, clear, and hot. By noon most suffered from sunburn, and the sharks were feeding on the stragglers.

Midday, we again saw planes overhead, but they gave no indication of seeing us.

Admiral Barbey's rescue ships reached the point where survivors reportedly had been seen on the day of the sinking, but he was actually 30 miles south of where we had been sunk. He then observed the current moving toward Samar, and they began working south and west. At 1500 that afternoon, they spotted a survivor, but he was a Japanese pilot who had been shot down and knew nothing about the survivors of the USS Gambier Bay.

After another day of riding the swells, exhaustion set in. Even the alert began nodding off to sleep, and their fatigue deepened. The comfort of the tropical waters was like morphine, a great way to a gentle death.

By the second night it was every man for himself. The conversation and prayers died away. Many men didn't look like men anymore. They were raw with sunburn, their lips were grotesquely swollen and blistered, and their eyes were bloodshot, dead and haunted.

Many had given up hope of a rescue.

Those in my group, the floaters that is, tied ourselves together with our shirttails so we wouldn't drift away, because if you did, you were gone and became shark bait.

October 27, early morning, a miracle occurred. We saw a small ship on the horizon, and they were friendly. They were LCI's sent out by the 7th Fleet. We had been rescued! At noon on 27 October, Commander Baxter decided that all survivors in the area had been rescued and set course of the Little Fleet for San Pedro on Leyte (one small group was not rescued at that time and were picked up some time later-they ended up spending 72 hours -only one had survived).

At approximately 0100 28 October, we entered San Pedro Bay, and the survivors were taken off either to go aboard a Hospital Ship, a Transport or an LST for movement toward the U.S. via Australia, setting foot on U.S. soil early December 1944.

Thus the Battle off Samar was over. It is estimated that 670 men went down with their Taffy III ships and some 116 men died at sea from the elements, wounds and sharks. Of these numbers, 131 were from the USS Gambier Bay and 126 from the USS St. Lo.

It has been referred to as the greatest of all Sea Battles, or as the greatest naval battle ever fought, or the last large-scale engagement between opposing navies that the world will ever see. Refusing to strike our colors and admit defeat, we reflected U.S. Naval traditions at the epitome of its finest hour.

Admiral Nimitz summed it up this way: "The history of the U.S. Navy records no more glorious two hours of resolution, sacrifice, and success."

And the last sentence of our Presidential Unit Citation: "The courageous determination and the superb teamwork of the officers and men who fought the embarked planes and who manned the ships of Task Unit 77.4.3 were instrumental in effecting the retirement of a hostile force threatening our Leyte invasion operations and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Services."

The Battle off Samar was a battle of firsts. The first time a U.S. aircraft carrier was destroyed by surface gunfire, the first time a U.S. ship was sunk by a suicide plane, and the first time the mightiest Battleship afloat fired on enemy warships.

May we never forget those who made and those who are making the supreme sacrifice so that we may continue to enjoy our liberties and freedom. Yes, here are the brave and here is their place of honor. Our shipmates gave their today so that we could have our tomorrow. May that tomorrow embrace the beauty of being, may that tomorrow provide time to see the best in each other, may that tomorrow be filled with kindness, love and understanding, may that tomorrow provide us the time to enjoy the beauty of America.

Yes, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."