

My ship is torpedoed by a Japanese “Betty” bomber during WWII

By: Van Christo

Quartermaster Second Class (QMIIc)

I was born in Albania and brought to America when I was a year old, so, I didn't have an American birth certificate, I wanted to join the Navy at age 16 during WWII, after badgering my father, my father, Piro, he swore before a Notary Public that I was 17-1/2 the minimum age to join the Navy.

I served as a Quartermaster Petty Officer on board a Destroyer-Escort, the USS Chaffee, DE230, for almost 18 months in the Pacific. During the American invasion of the Japanese stronghold on Luzon in the Philippines, my ship was patrolling Luzon's Lingayen Gulf on the night of January 23, 1945 at 11:15 PM, when a squadron of three Japanese "Betty" torpedo bombers was spotted by the Chaffee's radar. Two of the bombers, or bogies as we called them, continued straight on, but the third plane turned back towards the harbor where my ship and other Navy ships including the battleship USS Pennsylvania that was anchored on the port (left) side.. As the Chaffee readied for attack, our skipper, A. C. “Ace” Jones, ordered the Chaffee to turn towards the oncoming Japanese bomber that dropped its torpedo and struck our ship up in the bow. Although the Chaffee was damaged, no one was hurt and the forward compartments were sealed off.

Back then, on most Navy ships over 1500 tons, there were two locations from which the ship could be steered. The main location was in the Pilot House located at the top front of the ship. A second location was called *After Steering*, below decks at the very end of the ship. Because I was considered a good helmsman, my battle station on the Chaffee was *After Steering*, so I could feel the impact as the ship heaved and rolled lightly to one side when the torpedo struck. The *After Steering* station was fully equipped with a Gyro Compass for steering instructions where on receipt of a horn signal from the bridge, I engaged a clutch, and after a shudder, I assumed steering control. This feature proved to be very important during WWII in the Pacific, as the pilot house on American ships was the primary target of all Japanese Kamikaze suicide pilots. I was proud as hell that the battle station chosen for me on board the Chaffee was *After Steering*, as I was only 17 years old and the youngest sailor on the Chaffee. That day as I was at my battle station in *After Steering*, the Electricians Mate, Chuck Stroth and I suddenly heard the loud staccato **rat-tat-tat** of the 20 mm guns and the **Thump -Thump** of the 40's right above our heads on the fantail. We knew we were under attack and my heart started pounding in my chest. We felt the hit as the ship heaved and rolled to one side. All that only took a few minutes. It was then quiet as we awaited further instructions from the Bridge.

On the following morning, two officers from the Chaffee boarded the Pennsylvania, hoping to acquire spare parts for temporary repairs. But when the Chaffee officers came on board, they were greeted like royalty since the crew of the Pennsylvania firmly believed that the Chaffee intentionally intercepted the Japanese torpedo in a heroic effort to save it from striking the Pennsylvania that represented a fat, easy target. But that was not really the case since the Chaffee inadvertently got in the way of the torpedo! However, when our two officers returned from the Pennsylvania to the Chaffee, they also brought back 6 gallons of ice cream from the grateful crew of the Pennsylvania. For this actual wartime encounter between the Japanese torpedo bomber and the Chaffee, our crew was awarded the Philippine Liberation Medal with Bronze Star.

A Joint Reunion of the USS Chaffee and the USS Pennsylvania took place in Louisville,

Kentucky, during November 7-10, 2008. Since the battleship Pennsylvania had a crew of some 3500 while the crew of the Destroyer-Escort Chaffee numbered only 212, present at that 2008 Joint Reunion were about 400 people and crew representing the Pennsylvania while there were only 25 of us representing the Chaffee including 7 crew members. Nonetheless, on one wall of the huge Reunion dining hall were two mammoth banners with the names of the Pennsylvania and the Chaffee hanging side by side.

There, in a nutshell, you have heard a small portion of my own military experiences in the U.S. Navy during WWII.

xxx

U.S. Navy

Functions of Quartermasters (QMs)

Quartermasters (QMs) stand watch as assistants to officers of the deck and the navigator; serve as helmsman and perform ship control, navigation and bridge watch duties. QMs procure, correct, use and stow navigational and oceanographic publications and oceanographic charts. They maintain navigational instruments and keep correct navigational time; render "honors and ceremonies" in accordance with national observance and foreign customs; send and receive visual messages; and serve as petty officers in charge of tugs, self-propelled barges and other yard and district craft.

The duties performed by QMs include:

- conduct weather observations;
- determine compass and gyro error;
- compute tide and tidal current data;
- keep logs and records; determine their ship's position by visual and electronic means;
- compute times of sunrise and sunset;
- follow the nautical rules-of-the-road to prevent collisions at sea.