

The Forecastle Report, March 2009

THE BATTLE OFF SAMAR

By Bob Filipowski

On October 25, 1944, one of the most remarkable episodes in the history of the United States Navy occurred. An American task group, code named Taffy III, and composed of 6 jeep carriers (CVE's), 3 destroyers, and 4 destroyer escorts, was attacked by a Japanese force of 4 battleships, 7 cruisers, and 11 destroyers. One of the battleships was the pride of the Imperial Navy, the mighty 18" gun *Yamato*. History would later call this engagement "The Battle Off Samar."



In 1944, the Japanese were well aware of the fact that they were losing the war. If the Philippines fell, the home islands would be cut off from indispensable raw material supplies in Southeast Asia. A major last gamble was devised, called the "SHO Plan", in which they would play their last trump card, the powerful surface units of the Imperial Navy.

The force that attacked Taffy III that day was one of two pincers that was to meet at Leyte Gulf, where the American invasion was taking place. Things went badly from the start for the Japanese as the Southern Force was all but annihilated in a night action in Surigao Strait, by battleships, cruisers, destroyers and PT boats, under the command of Jesse B. Oldendorf, who masterfully executed the classic "Crossing-the-T" maneuver.



The Battleship *Tennessee*, a veteran of Surigao Strait, pulls away after refueling the *Dennis*.

The Central Force, which would eventually engage Taffy III, was mauled by US submarines and aircraft in San Bernardino Strait, and actually turned for home. Admiral Halsey, thinking that this group no longer posed a threat, pulled his powerful carriers and battleships off station, and raced north, after learning that four Japanese carriers (a decoy force) were headed his way. This left the northern flank unprotected, and opened the door for Admiral Kurita's battle group, which had reversed course again during the night.



Sam Palermo's ship, the USS *Dennis* DE-405 Both 5" guns would be disabled during the battle. The forward mount by shellfire, and the other would suffer a broken breach operating spring.

On that fateful October morning, Machinist Mate 3rd Class Sam Palermo had no other plans other than to get a good breakfast before he relieved the watch at 08:00. As he waited in the chow line, he noticed a large body of ships approaching from the north.

Everyone thought it was Admiral Halsey's Task Force 34, which was composed of fast battleships, cruisers and destroyers.

This impressive sight gave Sam and his mates a great sense of security. The feeling of well-being was short lived as the horizon suddenly lit up with gun flashes, followed by screaming shells, and multi-colored splashes among the vessels of Taffy III. (These colors helped the fire controlmen aboard Japanese



The USS *Heermann* (foreground) and USS *Dennis* early in the battle making smoke. Note the bow wave on the *Heermann*.

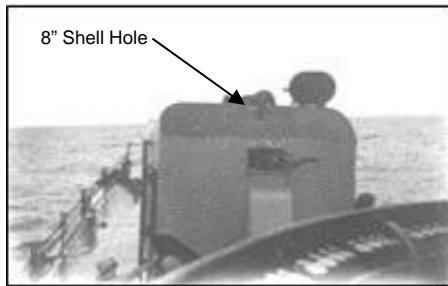
ships mark their ship's fall of shot during daylight, multi-ship engagements.) A moment later, general quarters sounded.

The *Dennis* had two boiler rooms and two engine rooms. Palermo, along with three other crewmen was assigned to one of the engine rooms during "GQ." His battle station took him down into the deepest area of the ship. Sam joked that he would have been the last one out in an emergency ... if he could get out. Against battleships and heavy cruisers, the likelihood of a super heated steam line being damaged was quite good, and would have meant almost certain death.



Palermo's primary responsibility was to monitor various redundant pressure systems. If one was damaged, it was shut down, and the backup system was brought on line. This apparently gave him time to think. When asked if he was aware of what was going on above, his response was: "No, but I did a lot of praying!"

During the battle the men below decks had to rely on their senses, and could only guess as to what was happening. Unfortunately, their worst fears were being realized as the *Dennis* shook and rocked with each 8" shell impact.



This little DE would be hit 5 times, resulting in five dead, numerous wounded, and substantial flooding. Fortunately for the Americans, the Japanese made a critical mistake by using armor piercing shells. The majority of the hits scored on Taffy III vessels actually passed completely through their hulls.

The *Dennis*' forward mount lost four men when a direct hit, punctured the turret, went through the deck, and came out the side of the ship. A second 8" projectile would enter the chief's quarters, where a member of a damage control party would suffer shrapnel wounds, and become the fifth fatality

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It may have been divine providence, but as Taffy III turned south to avoid the onrushing Japanese, this actually brought the CVE's into the wind. It was a bizarre scene as ships belched smoke, multi-colored shell splashes enveloped the carriers, and deck crews frantically tried to arm aircraft with whatever was handy. Many planes attacked the enemy with depth charges, rockets, and finally nothing as they made "dry" runs over the enemy, hoping to distract them.



USS *White Plains* is bracketed by enemy fire (background) as the *Kitkun Bay* frantically scrambles aircraft.

The 3 *Fletcher* class DD's along with the DE *Samuel B. Roberts* were the first to attack with torpedoes. The *Hoel*, *Johnston* and *Roberts* would eventually be sunk, but not before exacting some measure on at least three heavy cruisers. The *Heermann*, in spite of sustaining substantial damage, would actually engage the mighty *Yamato*, forcing her to turn away from this tin can's spread of 10 "fish."



As things became more critical, the *Dennis* along with the other two remaining DE's were ordered to engage. Although these vessels carried three torpedo tubes, they were never intended to attack capital ships. Due to the smoke and confusion, a coordinated attack could not be mounted. As the *Dennis* turned towards a column of four heavy cruisers, she realized that she was alone. Nonetheless, the *Dennis* closed to less than 8000 yards, and fired. Sam stated with justifiable pride that his ship nailed one cruiser before returning to screen the carriers. Palermo didn't find out until years later at a reunion, but the gunnery officer in charge of torpedoes was Lt. John M. Smyth. If that name sounds familiar, it should. He would eventually start the large Chicago furniture store chain.



As mentioned earlier, Sam had no way of knowing what was happening, but he felt the violent maneuvers of the *Dennis*, the impact of shells, the rattle of shrapnel on the hull from near misses, and the recoil of the ship's guns as she charged. When the ship started firing her two 5" 38 cal. guns, Palermo knew they were well within range of the Japanese heavies, but as the 40mm's opened up, and then the 20's, he really became concerned!



In spite of the gritty courage being shown by the U.S. tin cans and Navy fliers, the Japanese continued to press home their attack, and eventually began to find the range. The USS *Gambier*



The *Gambier Bay* (right) making smoke along with other Taffy III vessels early in the battle.

Bay was hit repeatedly, and staggered out of formation. The Japanese cruisers and destroyers sensing a kill, closed in on the baby flattop, and for over an hour pounded her mercilessly. She would be the only US carrier sunk by enemy naval gunfire in World War II.

There are many theories as to why Admiral Kurita decided to abort the attack, but nobody knows for sure. As the remnants of his fleet began withdrawing, it's been recorded that one resolute gob aboard a jeep carrier exclaimed: "Damn it! They're getting away!" However, Taffy III's ordeal was not over, and the *Dennis* would perform yet another heroic task.

This battered task group would have the distinction of suffering the first Kamikaze attack of the war. A Zero loaded with a 500-pound bomb penetrated the hail of AA fire and slammed into the *St. Lo*, setting off internal explosions from munitions and aviation fuel. One determined pilot, willing to die, had done more damage than the 18" guns of the mighty *Yamato*.



The *Dennis* immediately began picking up survivors. She would account for 434 men out of the 932 rescued! One of Sam's anecdotes relates to a sailor from aboard this carrier, which he met many years later at a Taffy III reunion.



With almost 700 men crammed aboard this small DE, finding a place to sleep that night was very difficult. This particular seaman, who was completely exhausted from his ordeal, found some sacks on top of the torpedo tubes, which he quickly claimed as his "bunk." It wasn't until the next morning that he realized that he had spent the night on top of five stuffed body bags!

As part of Sam's presentation, he brought in a number of mementos, which the membership found very interesting. They included some awesome photos, two pieces of shrapnel from an 8" shell, and a Navy survival fishing kit, complete with heavy line and lure!



Sam, we want to thank you for a great presentation. Your story helps keep alive the sacrifices made by all Americans during World War II. You make us all very proud!

The Photo Gallery

Sam Palermo, as part of his presentation, brought two photo albums just loaded with great snapshots, which portrayed life aboard a Destroyer Escort during World War II. For those of you who didn't get a chance to look at these gems, here is just a sample.



The USS *Dennis* in circa 1944 Pacific Theater camouflage.



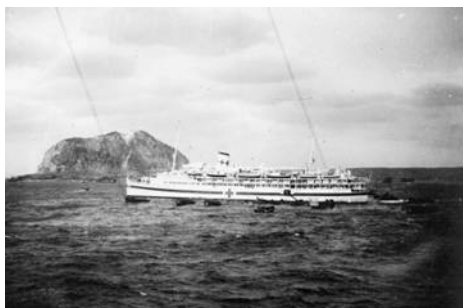
Spoils of war. A Japanese gun emplacement.



The forward 40mm gun mount and crew.



King Neptune's Court crossing the Equator.



USS *Solace* off Iwo Jima. She would be filled to capacity within 24 hours of arriving on station.



Heading for some R&R on Eniwetok.



King Neptune's Court crossing the Equator.



Loading torpedoes aboard a *Fletcher* class destroyer.



Hey guys! Are you sure this is my lookout station?



Nothing but beer, beaches, and baseball!



Hey! This stuff aint half bad!



USS *Sangamon* The large object sticking up from the flight deck is the stern elevator after a Kamikaze hit. Somehow, she survived!



Dennis approaches an *Independence* class CVL. These carriers were originally going to be light cruisers, but were changed before completion.



Refueling at sea from a *Cimarron* class tanker.