

'I didn't have sense enough to be scared'

Local man survives kamikaze attack

By Bill Harlan
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It's funny, sometimes, what will scare a person.

Hot Springs On April 16, 1945, a Japanese kamikaze pilot slammed his aircraft into the bridge of the destroyer escort USS Bowers, killing or wounding more than half of the 230 crewmen aboard.

Don Tillotson of Hot Springs, who had turned 19 just eight days before, survived the attack.

"I didn't have sense enough to be scared," Tillotson said in a recent interview.

He did have sense enough to slide safety harness into the firing mechanisms of depth charges on deck before they were detonated — an action that saved the lives of seamen thrown into the water — but Tillotson said he was just doing his job. "That's what I was there for," he said.

An Associated Press story reprinted on a recent Century Page of the Rapid City Journal reminded Tillotson of that day 54 years ago. The Journal is running old newspaper pages every day to commemorate the war.

The AP story about the USS Bowers was short, and it was the bottom of the page.

Still, it was remembering. "Tale of Bowers added to Heroic Sea Legends," the headline read. The story, datelined Philadelphia, began: "With their blood and sweat, crewmen of the destroyer escort USS Bowers written another chapter in the never-ending drama of America's heroes of the sea."

A reporter for the Philadelphia Bulletin was even more enthusiastic, calling the tale of the Bowers: "The story of a ship that would not die — a story of men to fall screaming into the sea with their clothes afire, of the death or wounding of 108 of her crew of 230, and of a few officers who made a makeshift hole way out."

The press seems purple until you see the actual story.

Tillotson was shocked to see the article reprinted in the Journal after all these years. His mother had not been the same slapping bigger than 50 years ago, and he had saved it since his war memorabilia.

Tillotson grew up in Hot Springs, the son of a pilot's office.

He tried to enlist at age 18 but was rejected because of his flat feet. As the war intensified, standards were lowered, and Tillotson qualified for the Navy's first-extended school at Great Lakes Naval Training Station near Chicago. He was trained on gunnights for anti-aircraft guns, but he served as a torpedoman on the USS Bowers.

The Bowers reached the South Pacific in time for the Battle of the

At right, a Japanese kamikaze pilot flew his plane into the bridge of the USS Bowers. The plane's fuselage is visible in this photograph. Below, Don Tillotson of Hot Springs, seated in the center with a glass of beer in his hand, enjoys a few hours ashore on a South Pacific island during World War II. Tillotson survived a kamikaze attack on the destroyer escort USS Bowers, but half of the other young man in this photograph did not.



Historic photo courtesy of Don Tillotson.

Leyte Gulf in the Philippines, and the ship would go on to earn four battle stars.

On April 16, 1945, the Bowers was on anti-submarine patrol in the Straits of Okinawa, off the island of Iwojima.

The first of four kamikaze planes attacked about 5 a.m., but American carrier pilots shot it down. Another destroyer escort shot down the second attacker, and the Bowers own gunners knocked out the third.

Then the fourth attacker bore down on the Bowers, spraying the deck with machine-gun fire. Some of the Bowers' gunners were hit. Others fired back. "You could see the bullets hitting the plane," Tillotson

remembers.

The kamikaze pilot, flying a "Val" fighter-bomber, flew over the Bowers on his first pass, just a few feet over the bridge.

"He just plain missed on the first time, or else he choked out at the last minute, or he don't know which," Tillotson said.

The pilot circled back, still taking rounds from the Bowers' gunners.

"He was standing off, at the very end of the funnel, where the depth charges were arrayed, as far from the bridge as you could get on the 1,500-ton ship.

Tillotson was wearing a "talker," which saved his life.

Talkers were overhead helmets



Don Tillotson today, with the hit of the ceremonial sword taken from a Japanese kamikaze pilot.

with earphones inside. The earphones were connected to the ship's communication system by 30 feet of cable. When Tillotson saw the plane was going to hit the ship on the starboard, or right, side, he began running to the port side. "I hit the end of that cable, and it threw me flat onto the ship."

The Bowers had been steaming at full speed. Now the ship was circling out of control at 22 knots, endangering other American ships. A destroyer was preparing to sink the Bowers to stop it, but an engineering officer regained control of the Bowers' radar below deck.

"There was shrieged all over," Tillotson said. "Everybody ran to the port side to get away from it, and that's where the bomb exploded."

Flam from the plane exploded into flames, setting fire all over the deck. The fuselage of the plane was imbedded in the bridge, and the pilot burned to death.

Forty-five crewmen perished instantly. In Tillotson's torpedo gun's

seven, three were wounded and two were killed. He escaped unharmed.

The Bowers was still afloat, but the captain had been blown overboard, none of the ship's communications worked and the pilot house was disabled.

"You can't imagine the confusion," Tillotson said.

The Bowers had been steaming at full speed. Now the ship was circling out of control at 22 knots, endangering other American ships. A destroyer was preparing to sink the Bowers to stop it, but an engineering officer regained control of the Bowers' radar below deck.

Miraculously, the remaining crew members were able to extinguish the fire and get enough control of the ship to guide it to port, under its own power, at Okinawa.

Tillotson was among that slaloon crew.

"The second day, that was the worst," he said. "There were bodies all over."

The final casualty toll: 65 killed and 40 wounded. It was the highest casualty percentage of any U.S. Navy ship that remained afloat and under its own power.

Tillotson said the crew later searched the pilot and found a white scarf bearing a red Rising Sun. The pilot also had a ceremonial sword, which the crew cut in pieces.

Bowers got the hit of the sword, which he has kept to this day.

Tillotson said the crew returned the Bowers to California. He and other crewmen who lived in the West went home on leave. The remaining crew sailed through the Panama Canal and on to Philadelphia, where the Bowers was refitted with a new bridge.

Tillotson, who has attended many crew reunions over the years, sent a copy of the Journal's Century Page in the Bowers' history with a note: "Look here guys. Fifty-four years later, we're still making the paper."

Undaunted by his first harrowing months at sea, Tillotson worked in the Navy for 20 years, serving on missile ships and on submarines.

He met his wife, Trish McCann, at a roller skating rink on Broad Street in Philadelphia. They have a son, Donald, who lives in Virginia, and a daughter, Nina McCann, who lives in Rapid City.

After Tillotson retired from the Navy, he said, "I couldn't find any use for my life, so I went to work at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Hot Springs. His use is retired from the VA.

Tillotson insists he was too young to be involved in 1945, but he did get a scare later in his Navy career.

In October 1950, Tillotson served aboard the guided missile destroyer USS Bowers. He had just two months left in the Navy. He had a wife, two kids and a different outlook on combat.

"I was 30 years old, and I was scared to death," he admits. "Self-preservation hit home real hard."

