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Words of Those Who Survived*
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I joined the Navy partly because of *The Saturday Evening Post*. As a boy I was an avid reader and became fascinated by a series of *Post* stories about a tramp steamer and its captain, and especially the illustrations of his ship riding the sea. The rest of it was because of my father--his stories of the sea--and the time when I was fifteen that he took me aboard a boat off the California coast. When that boat got out on the open sea, I got a thrill from feeling it seem to come to life. And I was hooked.

So, as soon as I was graduated from high school I hurried out to join the Navy, and on September 18, 1940, was signed up for a six-year hitch. First came boot camp and its efforts to make a sailor out of me. Then an assignment to the battleship *Colorado* where I first learned Navy life and got a taste of Navy discipline.

In late July 1941 the *Colorado* entered the Bremerton (Washington) Navy Yard for a refitting so massive that her crew could not live aboard. Consequently, on December 7 I was on leave and at home with my folks in the mining town of Mystic, South Dakota. Coming back from a Sunday afternoon visit to my girlfriend I happened to stop in at the railroad

depot. The agent there was all excited and hollered at me, "Hey, Frink! Didja hear? The Japs have bombed Pearl Harbor!"

First thing the next mornin' I was on a train back to Bremerton and burnin' mad. To think the Japanese would pull off such a rotten stunt when we were supposed to be at peace! And on Sunday, mind you! And as a dedicated Navy man, I felt really sick about all those ships shot up or on the bottom at Pearl Harbor. At the same time I had a deep feeling, Hey! I don't know whether I'll make it through this or not, but I know the United States is gonna make it. There's just no way them guys can take us no matter how many of our battleships is sittin' on the bottom at Pearl Harbor.

And I'll never forget how that feeling got reinforced as I was changing trains at Billings, Montana. There were a lot of cowboys there--on their way to volunteer--and, man, they were mad enough to eat those Japs up! It was great to hear the pals of some bronc-stomper give him a big hoopla as he climbed into that car headed for war. And that Western way of saying good-bye--so sharp and brisk and, yet, you could tell it meant so much inside--that was a real plus for my morale.

As for how I got on destroyers: I used to see those majestic great gray ladies--the battleships--come walkin' into the harbor. Next would come the cruisers. Then the destroyers would file in through the channel looking so cocky and sharp and charming that you'd just want to spank 'em on the fantail, and I fell in love with 'em.

After the war started and the United States began turning out destroyers just like it did guns and shells, they were searching through the fleet for men to man them. And, what sailor in his right mind wouldn't put in for that?

When I got word I'd been accepted for the destroyer program, I was standing watch in the *Colorado's* aft engine room while we and other battleships were hiding in fog banks off the

Aleutian Islands. That was when what later turned out to be the Battle of Midway was shaping up, but at the time it was thought the Japanese would go after the Aleutian Islands instead, and so we were there waiting for them to try it.

When we came back it was to Long Beach, California, and Ring Crosby and other stars were out there with yachts offering to take men ashore. I saw Humphrey Bogart as he came alongside with his fancy little putty-putt boat offering to take guys to the beach.

There, I found I was being assigned to the *Fletcher*, one of the first of the new destroyers to come out and the first of her class, so I said goodbye to the *Colorado* and was sent to Goat Island Receiving Ship at San Francisco. After about ten days of chomping at the bit I got my travel orders to New York and went down to the ferry dock where you to go cross-country from San Francisco.

I was sent to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and then I got to go aboard the *Fletcher*! Now, they call destroyers "Cans," as short for "Tin Can." But every sailor knows better. It's really "Can" for "Can Do," and don't you forget it!

Before I even seen my living quarters (and still wearing my "blues," yet!), I went down in the engine room to see what kind of engine I'd be playing with. And, boy, it was something to see! With both engine rooms on the *Colorado* we could put out 28,500 horsepower. But here I was looking at an engine that was little by comparison but put out 30,000 hp! And that was not to mention the after engine room!

I was assigned to the forward engine room--which is the control room--where later on I was to have the privilege of being throttlemans when on a full power run forward the captain suddenly called for emergency full astern. All throttlemen live for that day, and I was to get to do it! Anyway, I got to touch all these goodies and to see what an impressive power plant I'd be standing watch on.

After some action in the Atlantic, we went through the Panama Canal (the first time for me, and that's quite a thing to go through, that Canal) and on to Bora Bora. And you could not imagine a more idyllic place. You haven't lived 'til you've been to Bora Bora! Then we headed out to Noumea, New Caledonia. Us and a sister ship, the *O'Bannon*. She was the first of the new 2,100-ton *Fletcher*-class destroyers, after us, to come off the ways. We were number 445, she was 45°, and there was quite a bit of rivalry between us.

We had to approach the channel to the harbor at Noumea through a minefield, and pretty soon, chug, chug, chug, here came an old man in a little power boat. He was hollering something like, "Ahmlaaalalllllaaaa," and kept it up until we got the drift that we'd got into the minefield. Since we hadn't hit any mines this far, we backed out safely by following our own wake, then waited for a local destroyer to lead us in. When we got in there, we saw what looked like wrecks swinging on rusty anchor chains. And we couldn't believe it! This was our Pacific Fleet!

As was usual we nested up with some other destroyers. Many of the old can men on the *Fletcher* knew guys on those cans. And, man, they were really talking. They had been in that first battle of Savo Island where the cruisers *Quincy*, *Vincennes*, and *Astoria* went down, and, oh, man, we learned what we were in for!

From there, they moved us up to Espiritu Santo (code named "Button") in the New Hebrides, where we were given the job of escorting one of these old converted tankers that they put a flat top on to make an aircraft carrier. They were taking planes to Henderson Field at Guadalcanal, but things were so hot there that they didn't dare bring her closer than two hundred miles out. They headed this converted carrier into what little breeze there was, gave her as much speed as she could take, and started launching planes. She

was just jam-packed with planes, and some of the first ones to take off would lose altitude, and you'd see sheets of gasoline come off them as their pilots made a desperate attempt to jettison enough weight to stay above the water. And we'd go right over the top of 'em. A few didn't make it but most did, and we learned later that they'd touched down okay at Henderson Field.

The day we came into Noumea I made Machinist Mate, Second. TA DA! Now my General Quarters station would be on the lower level but in the aft engine room, and I'd be standing my regular watches on the lower level in the forward engine room.

In the first part of November we became part of the escort screening a large convoy coming to supply the guys on Guadalcanal with stuff they needed to be able to stay there. On November 12 they were unloading, and we and the *O'Bannon* and a bunch of cruisers and other ships were offshore out in the bay when there was an air attack warning. Everybody went to GQ. Here came the Japanese aircraft. And for the first time our GQ was for real. I was the last guy down the hatch to the aft engine room and I remember thinking as I dogged it behind me, "Oh, I sure like that blue sky!"

Even when we weren't in combat you couldn't get guys from topside to come down, even for a cup of coffee. To save their lives they wouldn't come down there.

The *Fletcher* carried 600 pounds of steam superheated to 875 degrees, and if you took a hit or anything else should happen down there to release that steam, a lot of guys could get boiled. But in action I felt safer down there than topside. The Spanish have a word, *querencia*, meaning that place in the bull ring from which the bull goes forth. And he will keep returning to his *querencia* because it is the place in the ring where he feels safest. And at General Quarters you need to have your own *querencia*. You may have to talk yourself into it, but it is essential that you have

it. Mine was the engine room, and once I had it I wouldn't have been caught dead in one of them topside gun tubs, just as them dinghies up there wouldn't have been caught dead below decks!

Anyway, I dogged down that hatch and went down the ladder. I was kinda uptight. I knew lap planes were on their way in and I'd have to give all of them pumps all the TLC--Tender Loving Care--they'd need. I'd have to be watching and sometimes adjusting pressures on the fire pumps, bilge pumps, the fire main pressure pumps, and also make sure the water and feed-water booster pumps kept doin' just exactly what they were supposed to do.

You can't see out from the engine room, but down there the ship speaks to you and tells you a lot about what is happening when you are in action. The turns of the propellers tell you the speed you are making. The heeling over of the hull tells you the ship is turning and how sharply and which way. The sharp "Wham!" of the 5-inch guns--they're our main battery guns and can shoot seven miles--announces that you are in a surface fight. When them 40mm cut in--and their sound will lay your ears back some--you'll know you're being attacked from the air. And what'll really put your ears flat against your skull is when the 20mm antiaircraft guns cut in. And the sound of a torpedo hitting your ship somewhere! Well, imagine that you are a kid walking along a railroad siding and pick up a big rock and throw it against an oil tanker. BOING! It's a ringing sound. Now add about ten decibels to that BOING! and imagine you are hearing it from inside that tanker, and you've got it.

Anyhow, on that afternoon all those guns were cutting in and the ship was really moving. I mean it was making time and heeling over in the turns. We shot down two airplanes in that action, one of them American. The American had been told not to be where he was, but when them Marine fighters got on somebody's tail they just wouldn't let go. They had been warned not to follow them down low and toward a ship.

If they were coming head on or at some funny angle the gunners wouldn't see their identifying insignia, and too many ship's gunners weren't all that hot at instant silhouette recognition anyhow. When they saw a plane coming in low and right at 'em, they were gonna shoot at it.

Fortunately the Marine pilot survived our attentions. He managed to fly to the beach and set his plane down on it. He suffered a couple of broken legs, they said, but it could have been a lot worse.

Finally, the guns quit shooting and everything calmed down. We come out of that fracas with no damage, but one of the transports got a nice big hole in the side of it. Didn't sink. They unloaded it later on, and I saw a forty-five-foot Navy launch go right in that hole to get stuff needed by the boys on the island.

About eight o'clock we turned around and went back down Sea Lark Channel. Meanwhile the Japs were comin' in. A little before midnight we went to GQ , and our column of ships started to go down "The Slot" between two columns of Jap ships. The *Fletcher*, being so new, had the latest and best radar, so we were supposed to be the lead ship. But somehow in the maneuvering we wound up as the last ship in the column, and as things were to turn out that was the best thing that could have happened to us. Torpedoes hit the can in front of us and blew it up so quick and complete that we sailed right over where she'd been and never scraped anything.

Topside a couple of damage control engineers spotted the wake of a Japanese Long Lance torpedo coming straight toward us. We'd all been warned to get off our feet in a situation like that, otherwise shock from the explosion was likely to shatter your ankles and drive 'em up your butt. So they got off their feet..but there was no explosion. The fish was running so deep it passed underneath and never touched us- went right under where I was standing in the engine room.

Having been in the engine room I didn't know nothin' about all that 'ill the next day. What I did know then was a desperate jangle from the engineer order telegraph. Those ol' reduction gears started a moanin', and all of a sudden we were laid way over to port in a hard right-hand turn. A bunch of black-powder smoke from torpedo-launching charges come down through the ventilators, and I knew we were on a torpedo run.

Pretty soon things became such a shambles it was a wonder ships weren't ramming each other. The destroyer *O'Bannon*, which by now was up front, actually did have to back down to keep from hitting a Japanese ship, then wound up so close to a Jap battleship that it couldn't depress its guns enough to hit her.

The bridge talker reported salvos from the main battery of the battleship *Hiei* were walking up our wake. They weren't just over-and-under ranging shots. They were coming right up our wake, and no way could we keep ahead of 'em.

Destroyers have a special emergency burner that the firemen can put underneath the boiler to make more smoke to add to that from the fantail smoke generators, and they put them there now. We were makin' a *lot* of smoke, and with those shells getting too damn close the captain made a hard right turn and managed to get us back into the smoke. Pretty soon when we stuck our nose out to see if we could find some useful work, the *Hiei* was still there and had us dead to rights. We ducked back into that smoke before she could hurt us and managed to get out of that madhouse.

Most of this action took place after midnight when it had become Friday the 13th. The *Fletcher's* number was 445, which adds up to thirteen. We had thirteen officers aboard. There were thirteen guns in the main and secondary batteries. Every time we went into battle, I wore exactly the same dungarees and thought the same thoughts. Now we know it'd be

crazy to believe that kind of superstitious stuff could have any effect on anything, but of all the American ships in that fuss only the Fletcher and the cruiser Helena remained unhurt. We had one shrapnel hole in the forward stack, and that was all. Having been in the engine room I didn't see any of that action as it happened, but when daylight came I saw the results, and it was a mess.

We heard that destroyers *Gushing*, *Laffey*, *Monssen*, and *Barton* and the cruiser *Atlanta* had all been sunk. The cruiser *San Francisco* was off to our port with a big hole in her starboard bridgeway. There was almost nothing left of her port bridgeway where, we were told later, an armor-piercing shell had killed everyone in there, including Admiral D.J. Callaghan.

I think it was the destroyer *Sterett*, a little 1,500 tonner, that was at our side. Holes in her sides had been plugged with mattresses, and you've never in your life seen so many mattresses stickin' out of the hull of a ship.

By now we had run out of torpedoes and out of ammunition, and in company with other surviving ships headed for "Button" (Espirito Santo) at the best speed we could make. The cruiser *Juneau* was part of our company. She had taken a torpedo and was down by the head quite a ways, but making good time-probably eighteen to twenty knots.

I had come up to the second level for a cup of coffee and just opened the hatch when, "Boom!" A great pillar of smoke boiled up from the water, and the *Juneau* was there and then she wasn't. Debris came splashing down, and one of the splashes was an entire 5-inch gun turret with men inside. And if you can believe it, some of 'em got out! When it was going down in the water they got out! We heard later that out of her crew of over a thousand men, all but ten were lost. Among them were five brothers named Sullivan, resulting in a rule that never again could brothers be allowed to serve in the same military unit.

At "Button" we come alongside the destroyer *Aaron Ward*. She was shot up something unbelievable! I happened to look up at the afterdeck house, and there was a 40mm gun up there. You know those tin seats that look like something off a farm tractor or something? That's what the one at that gun looked like, only this one had had a big hole shot right up through its middle, and I thought "Oh, brother! That gunner must have cashed in real sudden."

We were back at Guadalcanal in time for the November 30 night battle off Tassafaronga. A Japanese flotilla had come in to resupply their troops, and we were a part of Task Force Sixty-seven comin' in to prevent it. We came in battle column, and because of the *Fletcher's* superior radar we were in the lead. Then came destroyers *Maury* and *Drayton*; then cruisers *Minneapolis*, *Honolulu*, *New Orleans*, *Pensacola*, and *Northampton*; then destroyers *Lardnet*; *Lamson*, and *Perkins* all in line astern.

Our radar picked up the Jap ships at 7,000 yards (four miles) off the port bow. Our captain reported to the cruisers and asked permission to fire torpedoes. They refused him, saying the distance was too great. Four minutes later he did get permission, and we and the *Perkins* and *Drayton*, and, I believe, the *Maury*, launched our ten each. Then we destroyers were sent to the north to leave the cruisers a clear field for shooting at the enemy. And the cruisers took some bloody noses from it! The Jap cans let all us American cans get past, then they come out launching their torpedoes.

They hit the *Minneapolis* with two. They hit the *New Orleans* with one, setting off magazine explosions that blew off her entire bow from between the No.1 and No.2 Gun Turrets. They hit the *Pensacola* with one that flooded her after engine room. But it was the *Northampton* that got the worst of it. She took hits setting off explosions so huge that guys who were near her on the *Honolulu* said it had brought

tears to their eyes. Our guys who saw it from topside said her after section blazed up with fire; then pretty soon her stern sank into the water, her bow rose in the air, and she slid out of sight. We cruised the area picking up her survivors and got so many that when they formed a chow line along the port side of the deck house their sheer weight gave us a port list. Our cooks had to cook nonstop just to get 'em fed.

On February 11 we were part of a task force going someplace--and in those days that meant up The Slot at Guadalcanal--when the cruiser *Helena* reported that her scouting plane had spotted a submarine and had marked the place with a smoke pot. We were ordered by the squadron commander to break off from the task force and investigate. We went and, sure enough, according to the guys topside, we saw the smoke pot and at the same time our sonar guys began picking up reflections. Guided by the sonar our captain went after it and dropped a full pattern of eight depth charges.

Anyhow, after that set detonated we made a 180-degree turn and went back and dropped another set. Pretty soon we heard and felt shock waves from two deep explosions and knew that sub was on its way to the bottom. A few minutes later we heard and felt the shock wave from another huge explosion, a deep, heavy WHUMP! that shivered the ship. It made us all wonder if somehow those cotton-pickers had put a torpedo into us someplace. We all looked at each other kind of wild-eyed, dust and paint chips and stuff came down off the overhead frames, but no damage reports were coming over the telephone or sound system. We knew it had to have come from that sub, but why? Ships around us felt it heavily, too, but neither they nor us were ever able to figure out its cause. No question but that it had come from the sunken submarine, but could it have been carrying a load of explosives? Or, as some of our submariners suggested, could it have been an explosion of hydrogen gathered in the battery compartment? We'll never know.

To sum up, in November '43, we were involved in the invasion of Tarawa. After that mess they sent us back to convoy some hurt ships to the States. We spent ten days in Frisco and then come back out again and to New Guinea by way of Guadalcanal, and we went through the New Guinea campaign from end to end.

In February '44 we were sent to escort three oil tankers up from Funafuti to the Marshalls for the invasions of Kwajalein and Eniwetok. We didn't like that at all. They plowed along at what seemed like zero knots, and, even if we were zigzagging like crazy, it was boring to keep down to their speed.

I'll never forget when we went to General Quarters convoying those tankers, and the guy on the bridge phone for the engineers was the chief water tender. Somethin' was in the air, but the twelve-to-four watch passed and nothing happened. I'm on the throttles in the forward engine room. The telephone taker is right alongside me when he called the bridge and says, "I want to know what the hell is goin' on." He must have said it kinda nervous, because this chief answers, "Awww, hell, you're just as safe as if you were in your mother's arms."

Then, just at that moment, BOOOM !!!!!!! One of the Jap planes dropped a bomb that missed a tanker, but just barely, and that wasn't quite the punctuation mark we wanted for that chief's remark.

We went through the entire Philippines campaign, went to Puerto Princessa in Palawan, then went down past Tawitawi to Borneo. By this time it was the summer of 1945, and the old *Fletcher* was getting pretty battle-worn. Our deck house didn't even have many rivets left, and when we darkened ship we had to shut off inside lights. And we couldn't keep the water-feed pump pressure up right. And so on and so on. So, we were sent back home to the Terminal Island Navy Yard. And for us that was the end of the war.

When people ask what I got out of my service I have to say that it gave me a great sense of pride to have served. I thought it was a wonderful experience. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Actually, I wouldn't mind doin' it again, though maybe I'm a little more crazy than most guys.

In a destroyer engine room, especially when in combat action, you have to be able to cope with the unexpected and, often, do it suddenly. And out of this I developed a "can do" feeling and confidence in my ability to cope with situations as they arose.

After the war I worked for a time in my father's sawmill at Mystic, South Dakota. After that I worked for a time in the Homestake gold mine at Lead, South Dakota.

Meanwhile I was serving in the National Guard, where I was sent to electronics school. From that I was able to make a career at Boeing Aircraft Company in Seattle. Now I am retired and back home where I was born and raised in the beautiful mountain setting of Mystic, in the Black Hills of South Dakota.

I've had a good life, much enriched both psychologically and in opportunity by my Navy service, and at heart I will be a Navy man until I die.