The Battle Off Samar â€“ 60th Anniversary

Description

10/25/2004 marks 60 years from the day of the Battle off Samar,

which is near Leyte Gulf in the Philippine Islands. I ask you to take a few minutes to meditate on the events of this day so long ago. As a side note, this day has a tremendous amount of meaning for me, as my personal history has become linked with not only that day, but the people who Ã¢â‚¬Â•stood toÃ¢â‚¬Â• as the British would say, when the odds were so far against them surviving that most would have written it off as Ã¢â‚¬Å“impossible.Ã¢â‚¬Â• The story is compelling because the decks of the ships were awash in as much raw courage, as they were in blood and seawater. It speaks to the ability of the human race to rise to an inpossible challenge.

default watermark

The best book I have found on the events of this day is Ã¢â‚¬Å“The Last Stand of the Tin Can SailorsÃ¢â‚¬Â• by James D. Hornfischer. Not only is the story a compelling and captivating one, in and of itself, JamesÃ¢â‚¬â„¢ research was thorough and he really brings the people to you, not merely a litany of what ship moved where, fired what and the result is history. This book was awarded the Samuel Eliot Morrison Award for books on Naval History.

I will preface the rest of the post with this quote from Samuel Eliot Morrison: Ã¢â‚¬Å“In no engagement in its entire history has the United States Navy shown more gallantry, guts and gumption than in those two morning hours between 0730 and 0930 off Samar.Ã¢â‚¬Â• Samuel Morrison is one of the pre-eminent Naval Historians, particularly of the WW II era. The men in this battle are the forefathers of the men and women who risk themselves completely in Iraq and Afghanistan today land I consider them to be cut from the same cloth.

The Battle off Samar had been forming for several days before the 25th of October, 1944. Two groups of attacking Japanese surface ships, without aircraft carrier support had been working their way through the Philippine Islands, enroute the vicinity as Leyte Gulf in order to destroy the amphibious landing forces. This landing was General MacArthurÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s return to the Islands and the one where the historic pictures of him wading ashore were taken as he exclaimed Ã¢â‚¬Å“I have returned.Ã¢â‚¬Â•

One force of battleships, cruisers and destroyers had been effectively decimated by the night of the 24th by the battle force of Admiral Olendorf. In the approaches to the Surigao Straights, in the darkness of the night, the U.S. PT boats, destroyers, cruisers and bloodied veteran battleships from Pearl Harbor would extract a high price from Admiral NishimuraÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s approaching surface group. The battle was a textbook case of Ã¢â‚¬Å“Crossing the Ã¢â‚¬ËœTÃ¢â‚¬â„¢ .Ã¢â‚¬Â• Another battle force, under Admiral Kurita, consisting of four battleships (one was the IJNS YAMATO, equipped with 18Ã¢â‚¬Â• naval guns, the largest ever put to sea), six heavy cruisers, two light cruisers and eleven destroyers, had escaped detection as it slipped through the San Bernadino Straight that same night.

As the sun rose on the morning of the 25th, Admiral KuritaÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s Central Force bore down on an un-alerted task element that was called Ã¢â‚¬Å“Taffy 3Ã¢â‚¬Â• from 25 miles north of the U.S. group. Taffey 3 consisted of six Ã¢â‚¬Å“escortÃ¢â‚¬Â• carriers (CVEs), which were merchant ship hulls fitted

with flight decks, three FLETCHER Class destroyers (DDs) and four destroyer escorts (DEs) sunder the command of Rear Admiral Clifton Ã¢â‚¬Å“ZiggyÃ¢â‚¬Â• Sprauge.

Naval officers, from the earliest times fighting ships put to sea, have dreamed of being the winner in the great sea battles of history, hoping to equal Lord Nelson at Abikour Bay. In more modern times, U.S. admirals dreamt of Ã¢â‚¬Å“the great Mahanian sea battle,Ã¢â‚¬Â• described by Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, where the huge dreadnoughts duked it out in strategic battles at sea. The aircraft carrier dominance brought to the world on December 7th, 1941 pretty much ended that dream.

On this fateful day, the battle came to Admiral Sprauge, Commander Evans, Commander Hathaway, Lieutenant Commander Copeland and Gunners Mate Paul Carr, and a host of other unlikely heros I havenÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t listed, and they hadnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t planned for and it was nothing like Admiral Mahan ever thought of. he details above are to set the stage for what occurred next. Picture two sea-borne opponents, one Goliath, one David, yet unlike David, Admiral Sprauge had not been observing the warriors run from Goliath day after day, before he chose to step onto the battlefield. This situation was more like the war between the Philistines and Hebrews was raging and Goliath sought out DavidÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s flock as he tended his sheep and surprised him at dawn.

default watermark

Admiral Sprauge, upon being told of the Japanese presence, knew the only choice was to stand and fight, regardless of the cost. Had KuritaÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s Central Force gotten by Taffy 3, the heavy Japanese combatants would destroy the landing force. One lesson that both Carrier Group and combatant type officers constantly needed reminding of is you are only there to ensure the landing force gets ashore. All the other glorious Ã¢â‚¬Å“stuffÃ¢â‚¬Â• is superfluous. You are actually an Ã¢â‚¬Å“ablative shieldÃ¢â‚¬Â• for the Marines, or Army, as was the case here, leather jackets and fancy high, speed ship handling be damned!

The battle was quickly shaping up as one of complete sacrifice. The math says the U.S. Navy brought 23 5Ã¢â‚¬Â• guns and 42 torpedoes to the fight. All seven of the escorts were armed with nothing bigger than 5Ã¢â‚¬Â•/38 caliber guns, which can fire a 54 lb projectile. The destroyers had 5 guns, the DEs had only two. The Japanese had about 66 equivalent barrels on the 11 destroyers alone. IÃ¢â‚¬â„¢m not sure what the projectile weight on an 18Ã¢â‚¬Â• Japanese round was, but U.S. Battleship 16Ã¢â‚¬Â• guns fired a 2200 lb round, so it has to be roughly equivalent to say the Japanese could attack with rounds at least that size.

Commander Evans on the JOHNSTON, a DD, steamed at full speed into the approaching threat armed with torpedoes and 5-5Ã¢â‚¬Â• guns, he and his crew knew it was the moment to put all their skills and focus to work. His ship was sunk in the battle, hut not before he seriously damaged several of the attaching cruisers. As the survivors of the JOHNSTON clung to their rafts in the water later, one of the Japanese ships mustered their deck crew while the battle continued, to render a salute to their audacity and seamanship as the continued to chase the CVEs.

Commander Amos T. Hathaway commanded another of the FLETCHER Class destroyers on the 25th, the HEERMANN. Captain Hathaway and his crew sent their ten torpedoes and numerous 5Ã¢â‚¬â„¢; 40 mm, and 20mm rounds towards the Japanese, sustaining severe damage from battleship rounds hitting them, but the ship survived to be repaired. The SAMUEL B ROBERTS (DE-413), commanded by Lieutenant Commander Robert Copeland, raced into the salvos of the Japanese as well, with Gunners Mate 2nd Paul Carr as the Mount Captain of Mount 52 (the after 5Ã¢â‚¬Â• gun mount). Following the JOHNSTON into battle with the HEERMANN close by, the Ã¢â‚¬Å“Sammie

Ã¢â‚¬Ëœ BÃ¢â‚¬â„¢Ã¢â‚¬Â• is a legend in U.S. Naval history, for the courage her crew displayed that day. This vessel has rested on the bottom off Samar Island since that day.

Paul Henry Carr was a young man from Checotah, Oklahoma. The single son in the family, with 6 or 7 sisters, he enlisted in the Navy as did millions after Pearl Harbor. He was married, so he left a young wife behind when he sailed to the Pacific. In the book, Captain Copeland reported that Gunners Mate CarrÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s gun mount was not only the best on the ship, but the best he had ever seen in his service time. Not only was it so clean your could eat off the deck (a real feat in a gun mount full of hydraulics and constant foot traffic, let alone heavy metal things like shell casings and tools being dropped on the deck) the gunnery performance was also excellent. Paul Carr took his duty as Supervisor of a gun and gun crew seriously.

On the 25th, Mount 52 hammered out round after round, striking their targets. The rate of fire for a good 5Ã¢â‚¬Â•38 gun crew was about 10 rounds/minute. The Sammie B sustained numerous hits from large caliber weapons of the enemy, and at some point, the high pressure air compressors went off line. Ã¢â‚¬Å“HP airÃ¢â‚¬Â• is used to clear the 5Ã¢â‚¬Â• gun barrel of combustion fumes, which are toxic, after a shell is fired, and before the gun breech is opened to ram in the next round. Despite the loss of the gas clearing air, CarrÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s crew kept firing their gun mount. The smoke and odors must have been overwhelming, but they kept up their rate of fire. Eventually, power to operate the hydraulic loading ram was lost, so they shifted to manual loading the gun, as the Japanese ships surrounded the fearless destroyers and destroyer escorts who had the impertinence to take on the largest battleship in the world.

default watermark

Continuous firing of a gun heats the metal of the breech of the gun. At some point, a condition called a Ã¢â‚¬Å“hot gunÃ¢â‚¬Â• exists. This is when the temperature of the metal is so high, that it will cause the powder in the propellant casing to ignite without operating the firing mechanism. A standard gun magazine load on destroyers has been 600 rounds for all the years during and since WWII. By this time, Mount 52 had fired almost all of their rounds, and the gun was glowing red at the breech. While loading a powder casing behind the projectile, and before the breech block could be closed, the powder exploded, killing most of the crew in the mount. Paul Carr initially survived the blast.

Shortly after Mount 52 was silenced, the ROBERTS took a few more hits and was dead in the water, listing. As the medical crews went about treating the less wounded, they set Paul Carr aside to treat others. Paul had been ripped open from his chest to his crotch, and obviously wouldnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t live long. When they came back to check on him, he wasnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t where they had laid him, he had crawled back into the damaged gun mount, had picked up the last projectile and was asking for help to load and fire it.

A dying man on a dying ship, stood up, as the life quite apparently drained from him, and he was trying to carry on the fight, for the enemy was still a threat. He succumbed to his wounds shortly afterwards. The airmen who got aloft from the CVEs, many without bombs or even gun ammunition make any real or mock attacks on the Japanese ships to take the pressure off their own Ã¢â‚¬Å“home plates,Ã¢â‚¬Â• as well as the surface ships engaged at close range. IÃ¢â‚¬â„¢d almost venture to say you could have shoveled up the raw courage that day and stored it in 55 gallon drums, and had plenty to last centuries. I canÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t begin to do honor to the men who served there that day.

Read the book.

I am passionate about this story for the following reasons: I served 20 years in the Navy. The last shipboard tour I had was as the Executive Officer aboard the USS CARR (FFG-52). I had some of the war diary logs in my files turned over to me by my predecessor. It captivated me then.

I was required to take a computer course for my NROTC scholarship. A tall, thin man, the only Navy Officer at an Army oriented school (The Citadel) was my professor. His name was Captain Amos T. Hathaway, the Captain of the USS HEERMANN off Samar.

Reporting to Fleet Combat Training Center, Atlantic at Dam Neck, Virginia, I was assigned as the Combat Systems Operational Team Training Officer for the Pre-Commissioning crews of the OLIVER HAZARD PERRY Class FFG-7 Guided Missile Frigates. The first crew I trained was going to the USS CLIFTON SPRAUGE (FFG-16). As I was leaving two years later, one of the last crews I trained was USS COPELAND (FFG-25).

It was October, 1988 when I took over as XO on CARR from then CDR Tom Brown. I didnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t know much about the battle, just that one gunnerÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s mate had received the Silver Star for his heroism in WWII. During my time as XO, the Chief Staff Officer at our supporting destroyer squadron was Captain Paul X. Rinn, who had been the Commanding Officer on the USS SAMUEL B ROBERTS (FFG-58) when it hit a mine in the Persian Gulf. That ship would not have been saved, with out his innovative thinking and a crew that rose to an immediate danger, just as those of the DE-413 had done many years before.

default watermark

I know deep within me, that my association with this date is no coincidence. As I was re-reading some of the book tonight, and after scanning about for some information on the USS CARR, I found out CARR is now assigned to Destroyer Squadron Two out of Norfolk. One of the two squadrons of Japanese destroyers of KuritaÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s Central Force where in their Destroyer Squadron TWO.

If youÃ¢â‚¬â„¢re still with me here, here are some important notes about this battle:

In William ShakespeareÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s Henry V (Act 4, Scene 3), there is a speech referring to Ã¢â‚¬Å“We band of brothers,Ã¢â‚¬Â• about those who are on the field of battle on Saint CrispenÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s Day. The actual battle was the Battle of Agincourt October 25th, 1415. This was another battle in history where the underdogs won the day, despite the problems they faced.

The Charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War at Balaclava, memorialized by Alfred Lord Tennyson, happened on October 25th.

The Battle off Samar is the last naval ship to ship battle (other than between or with patrol boats) in the worldÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s history.

The battle happened with out air cover from large deck carriers, because they had been pulled away by Admiral Ã¢â‚¬Å“BullÃ¢â‚¬Â• Halsey to try to sink Japanese aircraft carriers. There were in fact, some Japanese carriers in the area, to the north east, which were sent as a decoy to draw the large ships away from the landing area. It worked, and the other point of that most Japanese naval pilots with any significant experience had been killed, so Japanese carriers were almost no threat. On the bookÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s web site tonight, there was a comment that the reason the Battle off Samar wasnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t ever publicized, it would have to have called to question why Bull Halsey was off on a goose chase, and not making sure the amphibious force was protected.

This past weekend, the survivors of several ships and aircraft squadrons had a 60th year reunion in San Diego. There are still many of them alive.

My final point: As I read stories on weblogs such as Black Five and Mudville Gazette, I see the same courage is being exercised, but these days, itÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s more than likely happening in a USMC or Army unit. We still have these sorts of young men and women answering the call to fight for freedom, even if it costs them their lives and I thank God for that.

If youÃ¢â‚¬â„¢re one of those men or women reading this that is serving now, you have my gratitude and my envy. May God keep you safe.

Category

1. History
2. Military
3. Military History
4. Navy

default watermark

Date Created
October 25, 2004
Author
admin