

On Board The Worden

Shortly after this incident, I received orders to report aboard the U.S.S. Worden (DD 352), a destroyer of the Farragut Class, the first of the new class of destroyers developed after World War I. She was named, I later learned, for Admiral John Lorimer Worden, who had commanded the U.S.S. Monitor, one of the first ironclad warships, in the famous Civil War battle with the Confederate Merrimac.

She had 8 torpedoes and four 5-inch guns, which fired 54-pound, hand-loaded projectiles. The guns however did not elevate more than 65° -- and so were relatively ineffective against aircraft flying overhead or divers coming in from high altitudes.

I reported on board February 4, 1942 at Pearl Harbor (after crossing from San Francisco on the U.S.S. Henderson, a World War I transport) and found Navy Yard workers installing 20 millimeter Swiss Oerlikon and 40 millimeter Swedish Bofors for anti-aircraft defense. Strange.

More than 20 years had elapsed since World War I and the U.S. Navy had not yet developed its own anti-aircraft armament. "Battleship Admirals" apparently made policy through these years, and the airplane didn't play a big role in their planning! The devastation at Pearl Harbor proved how wrong they had been.

The wreckage of ships in Pearl Harbor, when I arrived two months after the attack, was appalling. The Worden, tied up alongside a Navy tender, had escaped damage by scooting out to sea to gain room to maneuver.

The Worden was 346 feet long, but only some 25 feet wide. When she rode into a heavy sea, her bow would ride up on the crest of a wave and then abruptly fall some 30 or 40 feet as the wave passed amidships and finally under the stern. When the bow fell, the spray often covered the bridge and even the director above with green water. That was a little scary at the outset
"---ror'cnfs^--fo-gay-wonder."

A 30 or 40 degree roll of the ship, on the other hand, posed little concern for those on the main deck, only about 6 feet above the water line. Old hands developed a way of standing upright by standing athwartships, one knee bending to compensate for the rising deck, and the other knee straightening to compensate for the falling deck -- a sort of piston action to take account of the rising and falling of the deck underfoot. I never heard of anyone becoming seasick in a rolling sea -- waves coming from the side, but the fall of a destroyer heading

into a heavy sea (like an elevator dropping three or four floors) could cause trouble for the toughest old sea dog -- as we shall see later in this narrative.

Unfortunately, my introduction into the seagoing Navy was not altogether a pleasant one. The Captain of the Worden granted shore leave to half of the officers and men each afternoon. Getting drunk was the main reason to go ashore, since there were not nearly enough women around for all the military personnel looking for dates.

Negro mess attendants prepared meals for the officers in a tiny galley just off the wardroom which extended completely across the ship, from one side to the other. Those of us on board finished our dinner, including ice cream for dessert, at 6:30 p.m. The Executive Officer, a recent graduate of the Naval Academy, wobbled in an hour later and asked in slurred speech for his dinner. That was no problem -- up to the point of dessert.

"Where's my ice cream," the Exec screamed. "I done eat it, reckoned you wasn't comin' back," replied one of the attendants, cringing in the galley doorway. "Why you dumb good-for-nothing nigger, I'll see that you remember your place in the future," the Exec shouted back.

Through all this, I sat silent, not believing that this "officer and gentleman," a product of the regular U.S. Navy, could carry on in this manner. I was shocked, and this tragic episode has blurred my view of the Navy to this date.

Life at sea in the Central and South Pacific during wartime wasn't always as miserable as one might think. The nights were balmy and the heavens burst with stars from horizon to horizon. Only a bright moon seemed our enemy, as the glimmering light gratuitously silhouetted our ship for any Japanese submarine lurking nearby.

Standing watch, as I did as a junior officer of the deck, was an experience to be remembered. In this setting, I felt closer to my Maker than ever before or since. The stillness was broken by the low ping and pong of the sonar radar in the pilot house behind the bridge, muffled conversation and the command of the officer of the deck to conform to a prescribed zig-zag plan:

"Right standard rudder, come to course 206."

Then a moment later the response of the helmsman:

"Aye, aye Sir. Right standard rudder, turning to course 206."

And finally the helmsman's assurance:

"Steady on course 206, Sir."

Circumstances made for good fellowship between officers and enlisted men; we consumed countless cups of ink-black Joe (coffee) to stay alert and awake, and talked quietly of our lives in the States. But this peacefulness could be suddenly broken by radar or sonar reports, indicating the possible presence of enemy planes or submarines.

Then the Captain would order "General Quarters," a piercing alarm would sound, and all hands would scamper to their battle stations.

When the weather was nasty, I suffered a good deal from seasickness. At times, I couldn't keep anything down except saltine crackers, which I ate flat on my back in my bunk. Topside, standing watch in the air, was at times pure hell. But even when I was actively sick, I never gave in, and I don't believe I ever missed my turn at standing watch.

I remember the little things now more than actions a reader might find more memorable. I remember, for example, the terrible fatigue of standing a schedule of watches, four hours on, four hours off. I remember how I learned to sleep on my back and to crook one leg to keep from falling out of my bunk in a rolling sea.

I remember the shattering impact on my ears as I safety-checked the firing of a five-inch gun through a scope right next to the barrel during gunnery drills. I remember the tiresome staples of our mess: vienna sausages, Spam and condensed milk.

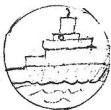
But I remember best the things that had a humorous twist. I can still see the Executive Officer asleep in a deck chair during the Battle of Midway. I remember the night the officer of the deck, following the zig-zag plan, ordered "right standard rudder" but forgot to give the helmsman a new course. The result: the ship at "right standard rudder" made a complete 360° circle before the officer of the deck was aware of his mistake. The Captain was asleep; we never told him.

I remember the Medical Officer accidentally firing his 45-caliber pistol through the side of the ship, leaving a clean little hole through which a single ray of sunlight immediately brightened his stateroom. I remember the time the Gunnery Officer gave the wrong command and the five-inch battery fired out to sea -- instead of at the Japanese on shore.

The Captain took his job seriously: his career depended on his performance. And he often resorted to punishments, established it would seem, in the era of John Paul Jones, to enforce the Navy's code of discipline.

After a time, I was qualified to stand watch as officer of the deck alone -- a big responsibility for a "90-day wonder" with only a couple of months at sea. On one occasion, the night log book called for our formation of destroyers, cruisers and carriers to change course at midnight.

I dutifully called the Captain to the bridge for this intricate maneuver. The night was dark. We did not yet have radar. We judged our distance from the next ship by closely gauging how much of the binocular aperture it filled. The Captain would draw a little sketch in the night log book, that might look like this:



Ship close--only
small part visible



Same ship--farther away--
more of ship visible

If the image in the binoculars showed less of the neighboring ship than shown in the sketch in the log book, you were too close; if the image showed more, you were too far away.

On this occasion, after changing course, the image kept getting larger, that is we kept getting too close to the neighboring ship. The Captain could not figure out what was wrong. I made my first big mistake. I volunteered that the course given in the night log book was 10 degrees off. When the Captain realized that my estimate was right, and had the ship on the proper course to stay out of danger of a collision, he barked:

"Low, go to your quarters. You're confined to your room for 10 days!"

An attendant brought food to my room three times a day, I slept through the night and stood no watch, and at 11 o'clock each morning an enlisted man with sidearm, deputized as a "Sergeant at Arms," took me for an airing around the main deck. Ten days later I was standing watch as if nothing had happened and the Captain never referred to the episode again.

Another time I was standing an afternoon watch. We were in a shield of four or five destroyers screening several larger vessels, including a cruiser and battleship. For a reason that I couldn't fathom, the cruiser to our stern seemed to creep up on us. I watched this for a time, reluctant to put on more speed to avoid the closing cruiser, an action that would have moved the Worden ahead of the other destroyers in the screen. I called the Captain. He took over.

After the cruiser settled back to her proper station, the Captain scowled, "Low, you're confined to your room for embarrassing a battleship and assaulting a cruiser." I later learned that the cruiser put on extra speed to launch its seaplane, but I didn't understand what was going on at the time. I should have notified the Captain sooner. As a result of this confinement, I missed seeing the Straits of Juan de Fuca, the entrance to Puget Sound, which I understand are worth seeing.

The experience in the Pacific was not all fun and games. My file shows battle stars for 9 major engagements.

Battle of the Coral Sea

During the Battle of the Coral Sea, the Worden was detached from the carrier force to escort one of the two fleet tankers supplying the whole Pacific. Perhaps we were picked for this duty because our 5-inch guns, with their limited elevation, were of not much use against dive bombers, and the U.S. force was stalking a Japanese carrier group. When the other tanker and its destroyer were both sunk, we found ourselves with a considerable responsibility -- to put it mildly.

One night we were called upon to rescue the crew of a Dutch merchantman transporting mules from Australia to the States. The shrieks of the drowning mules was terrible, but we were able to save the entire crew, including "Sparks" (the radio officer), with whom I communicated in French.

The Captain did everything but place the poor devils in chains. He kept them below deck and treated them as prisoners of war! I don't know whether the Captain knew that the Dutch were our allies and had been fighting the Germans since 1940, more than a year before the U.S. came into the War.

In any event, the Captain ordered me to escort these baleful Dutchmen ashore at Noumea, New Caledonia, where my French would be useful. Once I had rid myself of my charges, I repaired to a little French bar where I passed the afternoon imbibing Pernod and other lethal concoctions. The Shore Patrol (an enlisted man from the Worden) picked me up and the next morning I had a hangover, but otherwise was no worse for the experience.

Apparently, my visit to the bar was acceptable behavior for a Naval Officer in such circumstances, because the Captain never mentioned it to me.

During the Battle of the Coral Sea, the huge aircraft carrier Lexington was sunk by Japanese aircraft. The survivors were taken aboard the carrier Yorktown and some destroyers, which were ordered to Tongatabu in the Friendly Islands where all hands were to have some rest and rehabilitation.

Ashore at Tongatabu, we found Paradise. The islanders enjoyed a communal society where what is mine is yours and what is yours is mine. It was not surprising, therefore, to find donkeys, bicycles -- and lovely Polynesian beauties -- available without fuss or charge. The land was lush in other ways: bananas, coconuts, pineapples, yams, pigs running wild, and plenty of fish for the taking in the waters around.

In the interior we came across a New Zealander and his family. He sent one of his sons up a tree to fetch some coconuts to soothe our thirst and said he would prepare an authentic luau -- roast pig cooked in a pit Polynesian-style -- if we would return the next day.

We agreed, then asked what we could do to reciprocate. He could use some shirts, he said, since he had been cut off from civilization for the two years of the War, and had started to go native, which meant practically without clothes. OK. We said we'd see him tomorrow.

Our New Zealand friend never got his shirts and we never tasted his roast pig. When we returned to the ship, we got underway at high speed for Pearl Harbor -- the Japanese Navy was on its way to attack the Hawaiian Islands.

We sped north, took on provisions and ammunition at Pearl Harbor, then headed west to what turned out to be the Battle of Midway, the turning point in the War in the Pacific. The U.S. fleet had the upper hand, because some smart civilians had broken the Japanese code and we knew beforehand what they were up to. Even so, we lost some 150 planes and the carrier Yorktown in turning back the Japs.

As I have pointed out, the Worden was at a disadvantage in carrier warfare where the job of the destroyer was to protect our carriers from submarine and air attack. Our defenses against attacking planes were not the best.

Perhaps for this reason, the powers that be ordered us back to Mare Island in San Francisco Bay for refitting and the installation of surface radar. Some of the officers and men were detached to specialized schools -- anti-submarine school in San Diego, fire control school (how to operate the directors that controlled the firing of the ship's guns), fire-fighting school, etc.

But again, as in Tongatabu, we received emergency orders, this time to proceed at all possible speed to Adak Island in the Aleutians. So sudden was our departure that several officers and men were left behind. One of them was the officer in charge of the ship's service store, where at certain times, the crew could buy candy, cigarettes, toothpaste, etc.

Once underway, the Captain told me to take over his duties. I

had no idea of the stock and never had the time -- or inclination -- to take inventory.

We ran into heavy seas as we approached Adak. We were constantly cold and wet from the salt spray which showered down on us as our bow rose up and fell into the raging waters. Twenty-year Navy veterans were seasick.

Standing watch on an empty stomach, as I did many times, was a terrible trial. One afternoon, the Captain, seated in his chair perched on the bridge, called over to me: "Low, sit down for a few minutes to take a load off your stomach."

When he said "take a load off your stomach," I knew that he had experienced seasickness too, because that is the only way to describe the feeling of weight on the stomach that comes with seasickness on an empty stomach.

Disaster in the Aleutians

Our mission was to take aboard a small troupe of Alaskan scouts -- mostly trappers and hunters taken into the Army for specialized duty -- and land them on Amchitka Island, which the U.S. suspected was being occupied by the Japanese to construct an airstrip. We arrived off the southern coast of the Island Christmas eve, 1942. The night was so black and the snow came down so heavily that we never saw land, so the Captain tried to work out our position through soundings with the anti-submarine sonar device and the new radar, installed just before we left California. The Captain really was not sure where we were. He ordered the signal light turned down vertically into the water. In the absolute darkness and the thick, falling snow, the light pointing into the water was a futile move and certainly foolhardy, because it could attract enemy attention to our presence. All I know is that I was plenty scared.

The Captain had the light turned off. The rugged lieutenant colonel -- no uniforms on these fellows -- volunteered to the Captain: "Let's call it quits. If I thought I could get half my people ashore in the rubber boats, I'd say go. But this doesn't make sense."

So we returned to Adak -- mission not accomplished. On January 11, 1943 we returned, this time to Havana Harbor on Amchitka's north coast.

We maneuvered our way into the narrow harbor, sent the Alaskan scouts off in their rubber boats toward the beach, and headed back out. No evidence of enemy resistance so the Captain secured General Quarters. Mission accomplished, I returned to my bunk and fell asleep in a matter of minutes.

I was awakened by an unfamiliar rumble and then a jolt, followed in seconds by the shrill sound for General Quarters.

Once on deck at my battle station on the forward 40 mm anti-aircraft battery, I learned that the bottom of the ship had grazed a submerged rock and that the main engine room was filling with water. Soon we were without power, and the ship drifted toward a towering rock some distance from the western shore. The Captain let out the anchor, but the wind and waves from the open sea to the north continued to drive us ever closer to the rock.

At daybreak, the main flotilla of transports, landing craft and destroyers came through the harbor neck. A destroyer from this group tried to tow us free, but the line parted. The ship started to roll on its side, the starboard deck soon under water.

I sent some men below to fetch up the shoring (wooden 2' by 4's used to "shore" up bulkheads in damage control), which I thought would come in handy. We had only one small gig and a few doughnut balsam life rafts. I wasn't too confident about the standard-issue, inflatable rubber lifejackets.

Men started to jump into the sea from the ship's superstructure, others waded in and pushed off from the main deck, awash in the sea on the starboard side. The Captain ordered "Abandon ship." The Paymaster, a member of the University of California swim team, did a swan dive from the forecandle!

The Reserve Coast Guard ensign in charge of the landing craft on the transport Middleton, his job of landing infantry troops ashore not yet completed, ordered his Higgins Boats to the rescue of the men in the water. I learned later that his father was an Annapolis graduate, and now an Admiral in the regular Navy. The son, to show his independence, grew a beard and signed up as a reserve ensign in the Coast Guard.

That independence of spirit was at the core of his decision to rescue the crew of the Worden. Once he recognized that there was no Japanese resistance to the landing, he took it upon himself to come to our rescue, instead of completing the job of landing the Army troops.

Of course, I didn't know any of this at the time. What I did know was that there was hardly anyone left aboard and I didn't want to be sucked underwater when the ship went down. So I took my 45-caliber pistol from the belt around my waist, took off my shoes, and pushed off into the icy water, clinging to one of the "shores" that I had ordered topside sometime before. The rubber life jacket issued to all hands proved useless; it deflated almost immediately and offered no buoyancy.

What did I think about in the water? I had no heroic thoughts and I didn't remember my love for my mother or anyone else. My

mind was clear; I was intent on survival.

The real heroes were two enlisted men who lifted one of their number, whose leg was broken in the initial jolt when we grounded, from the wardroom transom and tossed him in a life-jacket into the water. He was eventually rescued. Without this bold act, the injured man would have gone down with the ship.

Some minutes later -- whether it was five minutes or twenty eludes me today -- a Higgins Boat came to my rescue, lowering its landing ramp directly into the water, which freely filled the bottom of the boat. I was pulled in over the ramp and taken to a rope ladder, hanging down the side of the Middleton. I tried to move my legs. They were stiff from the icy water; I could not move them. The crew hoisted me aboard in some kind of a net.

Doctors aboard, with what looked like kitchen knives, cut the clothes off me. My chest was dry. The "jungle cloth" jacket, bound tight around my waist by the belt from which I had taken my pistol and closed tight at the neck, had kept the freezing water from my chest. In the warmth of the sick bay, my legs lost their numbness. The crew aboard gave me some clothes and a hot meal.

But all of the crew didn't make it. My records show that three crew members died and were buried at sea or on Amchitka, and eleven others were listed as missing.

That night the Middleton dragged her anchor in the face of a 60 mile an hour north wind (called a Williwaw) and went aground. We had no power, heat or light; we camped out in Army tents, and ate Army rations cooked on makeshift stoves set up on deck.

I was officially designated a survivor. I had lost everything of personal value when the Worden went down: clothing, personal mementoes, including the little miniature gold and silver tennis balls that I had won as a finalist in national tennis championships, books on economics that I had requested Professor Elmer Fagan at Stanford to send me (I had decided that after the war I would be a college instructor), a record of anti-Semitic incidents that I had kept up to date. My records show that on March 2, 1943 I filed a claim for reimbursement for personal property lost in "marine disaster" in the amount of \$355.25.

The Captain also wanted to know the value of the ship's service stock on January 12th, and how it would be subdivided as to cigarettes, toilet articles, candy, etc. so he could put in for insurance. I guessed \$700.