

## XIV. The Battle of Okinawa

Ever since the Battle of Leyte, Naval intelligence bulletins had been warning about the new enemy tactic of using suicide planes for attacks against our fleet. The impact on the *Rall* was to intensify training on our antiaircraft defense.

With suicide planes, one could expect to be firing at aircraft diving in with the intention of hitting the ship, rather than dive bombing. Our defense strategy would have to be different.

As a result, my battle station was changed. Instead of being stationed below decks with a repair party, I was placed topside. As Recognition Officer, I was a specialist in identifying friend from foe, not that it made one hell of a lot of difference. If a plane is diving on you, you shoot. My new duty was to be forward of the bridge, in charge of the forward AA battery, three 20mm guns.

When it happened, we first had an "Air Flash Red." Next, our air search radar picked up many bogeys to the north. Then we could see them coming. Not an orderly formation of planes, but a disorganized mass of small loosely-formed groups. By the time the first groups were overhead, the balance of this mass of planes stretched as far as the eye could see to the northern horizon. There were hundreds of them.

Even though we had heard of this sort of thing, it was a new type of emotional experience. No one needed the Recognition Officer to identify these as enemy planes. The time had come. All of our training was going to be put to the test. You live or die depending on how well you have been trained.

One small group turned in our direction. This was it. The kamikaze attack on the *USS Rall* had begun.

I'm getting ahead of myself. The saga of the *USS Rall* at Okinawa really began in mid-March of 1945 at Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides. It was there that we picked up a convoy headed for Okinawa. This included the troops of the 27th Infantry Division. In later years, I found that I had a good friend in this division.

I remember well the night before we left. I had the OOD watch in port. A Roman Catholic priest came aboard to conduct Holy Communion for the Catholic seamen. Although a Protestant, I watched from the background.

In those days, I wasn't what you'd call a devout Christian, but as the Easter season was approaching, I felt some spiritual need. It had been a long time since regular

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church services for me. The services I attended at Riverside Cathedral, when I was in Midshipman school at Columbia University, had awakened in me some awareness of the Almighty.

I was impressed by the service that was conducted on the fantail, and in particular, the devotion of the crew members taking part. For a few, it was to be their last Communion on this earth. Perhaps it was of some consolation to the mother of one of these men when a short time later, I wrote telling her of her son's last Communion. While checking the wounded, I was the person who verified that he was dead.

Another event took place during the night. I was overcome by a bout of terrible fever, vomiting, and diarrhea—apparently a bit of dysentery. I could hardly leave the sack to make it to the head. For about a week, all the way back to Ulithi Lagoon, I was too weak to stand watch.

The apparent reason for the dysentery was that harbor at Espiritu was filthy and the shortage of barges for garbage pickup and disposal had created conditions which were definitely unsanitary. Several of us caught the “bug.”

When we arrived at Ulithi, the ship stayed only long enough to pick up our mail, some supplies and to refuel. It was now the 4th of April, 1944 and we were escorting the convoy to Okinawa. The excitement started almost from the first day out of Ulithi.

It began with the convoy making emergency turns to avoid unusual surface contacts. Some of these were floating mines which would be destroyed by one of the escorts. One object turned out to be an empty orange crate. Other escorts had sonar contacts which were determined in most cases to be not a submarine. On one occasion it was a possible sub. After a time the escort lost contact and returned to the convoy.

Then it was our turn. We had a solid sub contact; loud and clear. It happened that we were in a corridor which provided a safe-conduct zone for friendly submarines. Our subs had certain “safe lanes,” lanes in which they could travel between their base and their war patrol zone. In these areas, we were not permitted to attack any sub unless it was shooting at us.

The Convoy Commodore ordered us to stay on top of the sub until the convoy was well out of range. Underwater sound conditions were perfect. We were able to track it continuously. The echoes were well defined. Every move of the sub could be followed precisely.

We challenged it with the appropriate recognition signals. If it had been one of ours, it would have answered the challenge. Also, when approached by a friendly patrol vessel such as ours, a friendly sub was supposed to move on a certain prescribed course at a specific depth. The sub did none of these things. In fact, it took extreme evasive action every time we approached. Conditions were so good that we could take

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depth readings on it with our fathometer. There was never a doubt in our minds, we had a Jap sub dead in our sights.

Since we could take no action, and after our convoy was safely over the horizon, we rejoined the convoy and resumed our position in the formation. It was the most frustrating experience that one can imagine.

Shortly after that we were able to vent some of our frustration. One of the lookouts spotted a floating mine. All of us on the bridge tried our hand at hitting it with .30 calibre rifle fire.

A small target bobbing in the water at 200 yards doesn't present much of a target, especially from the rolling deck of a DE. The Captain quickly turned it over to the 20mm guns, and after a few short bursts one of them scored a hit and the mine exploded. The blast was impressive and we could appreciate the destructive force that it would have had on the hull of a ship.

As for that Japanese sub, it undoubtedly had a specific zone to patrol, just as did our own subs. A few months later, in that same zone, the *USS Indianapolis*, a heavy cruiser, was torpedoed and sunk. It was cruising alone and, due to some fluke in communications, it wasn't reported missing for several days.

Only a few crewmen survived. Hundreds suffered horrible, lingering deaths by thirst, exposure and sharks. I often wondered if it was sunk by that same enemy submarine.

Our convoy arrived at Okinawa about dawn of April 9th. The battle for the beach-head had been going on for several days. The forward elements were poised for the assault on the port city of Naha. The fighting for control of the airfield was intense.

Our only air cover was provided by the fleet aircraft carriers and one or two baby flattops, one of which had provided ASW coverage for us on the voyage up from Ulithi.

The morning was gray and cold. We all felt the chill, especially since for so many months we had been cruising exclusively in the tropics. It seemed to affect me more, as I hadn't fully regained my strength after the bout of dysentery, and I was tired.

I had the midwatch and there was no point in trying to catch a nap after coming off duty, since the dawn General Quarters would start at about 0430.

Because of air raid alerts (condition yellow), we did not secure from GQ until 0700. Then I did hit the wardroom for a quick chowdown. I had hoped to log a little sack time, but instead I had to decode some urgent messages. Most of them dealt with warnings of imminent massive suicide attacks.

The *Rall* patrolled the perimeter of the area while the troop ships moved to the beach for disembarking. The 27th Division was supposed to be a reserve division, but

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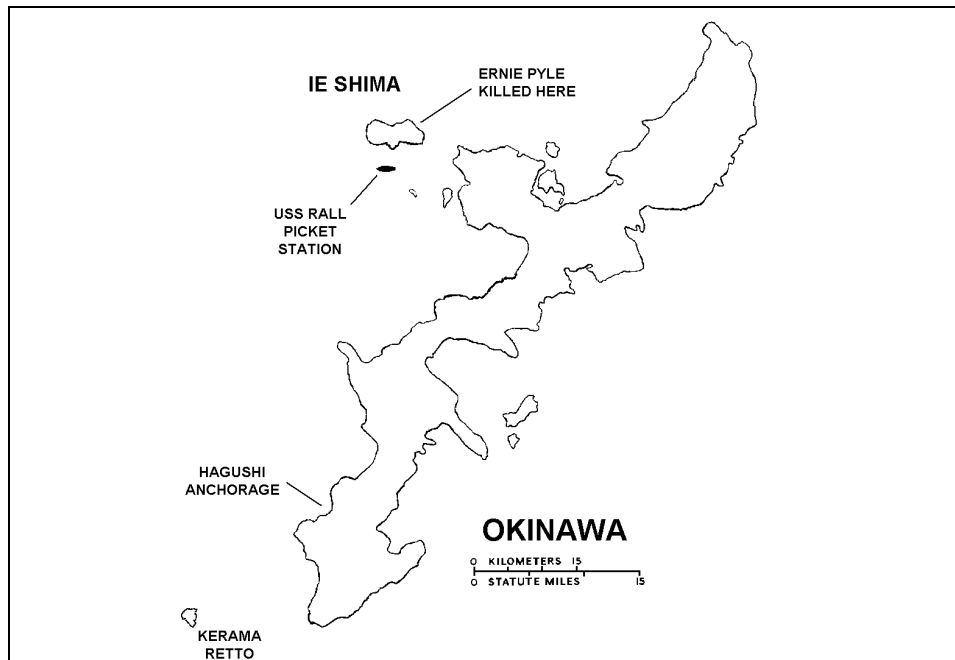
several years later I talked to one of those GI's in my home town. He said, "Bull." His unit was in a firefight by nightfall.

I didn't see any of this. By early afternoon, I was gratefully sleeping and didn't watch the landing. I was to go on watch at 1600, but as I recall I had about two hours sleep before going to GQ for another air raid alert. That was the last real sleep that I was to have for a long time.

The following several days and nights were punctuated by frequent GQ calls as enemy air raids started coming down from the north. My recollections are of being constantly cold, tired, and sometimes hungry. Day ran into night and night into day: on watch, off watch, back to my battle station, but never into my bunk.

I recently checked the Ship's Log for details. In the following ten days, we went to GQ 33 times for air raids. Fourteen of those were during the two days surrounding the subsequent kamikaze attack. In addition we had three GQs for sonar contacts. Many other alerts of a minor nature (aircraft in the general vicinity) weren't mentioned in the log.

The *Rall* had been assigned picket duty on the west side of Okinawa, just south of a small island called Ie Shima, notorious as the place where the famed war correspondent Ernie Pyle was killed. In fact, we were nearby on the day that it happened.



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The current battle news was broadcast every day to all units (in code, of course, and probably decoded by me) so that each ship would be up to date on the tactical situation. Included were items of special interest, and Ernie Pyle's death was noted in the broadcast.

On the 10th of April, 1945, our second day at Okinawa, I had the afternoon watch. The weather was cloudy and the seas moderately rough, with whitecaps and gray water, not the bright tropical blue to which we were accustomed.

The lookouts and I were scanning the skies, watching for any aircraft that could be slipping through the radar screen. A voice from sonar called out, "Bridge, CONTACT! Bearing 210, 1200 yards." A sub? Poor sound conditions, because ideally one would hope to make a contact at over 2000 yards.

I snapped out of any lethargy into which I may have drifted. This called for instant action. Stepping to the entrance of the sound hut, I automatically started giving the routine commands. "Call the Captain. How does it sound?"

"Mushy," was the sonarman's reply. "Target moving left."

That was toward the shoreline, about two miles distant. Could it be a sub slipping in close for a run at the invasion fleet anchored at Hagushi Bay off Naha harbor?

Better play it safe. "Talker, alert all hands. We are about to make a depth charge attack."

We didn't sound GQ during an attack, as it would create too much confusion.

"All ahead standard." To myself, "Quick, Graves, what is the depth here?"

Maybe 300 feet. We had been patrolling at 12 knots. Standard speed was fifteen knots. I had less than two minutes until we were in position to drop charges.

Should we use hedgehog charges? No, target not too well-defined. "Set charges for medium depth, prepare to fire on recorder." By now my orders were flowing smoothly.

The Captain was on the bridge and we felt his presence, but he would not interfere with his OOD in the midst of an attack.

I took a quick look at the traces on the recorder. No need for sonar to tell me that the echoes were fading. It sounded like it could be a school of fish, maybe a whale, or even just a thermal layer.

Did I detect down doppler? Sonar said, "Maybe."

Could he be turning toward deeper water? Submarine commanders don't like to be caught in shallow water.

I had been conning the ship to port and was on course 210, preparing to lead the target to the left. A change.

"Right standard rudder. Steady up on 245."

I had now conned the ship onto a heading coinciding with the new projected path

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of whatever was out there. “Fire on recorder.”

We dropped depth charges. The “K” guns blasted their lethal charges off to each side of the ship, with a familiar kaboom kaboom as each charge detonated.

Geysers of water erupted after every explosion. The recorder sonar traces had faded even before I had ordered, “Fire!” It was only a guess.

“Sound the General Alarm.”

I hated to call everybody out of the sack. They had already been to GQ, how many times today? We conducted a standard search of the area. No debris, no further sound contact.

“Secure from General Quarters.”

The ASW officer and other senior officers reviewed the recorder traces and agreed it wasn’t likely that it was a sub. We probably scared the hell out of a whale. Our lead sonarman, Fontana, said he suspected it may have been a midget sub.

Later in the day, we learned that the airfield had been secured by our forces and the Japs had been cleared from the Naha area. The Marines had landed 18 F-4U Corsair fighters on the newly-established airbase.

The OP Plan (Operations Plan) called for substantial reinforcements in air cover. MacArthur was to have released several squadrons of P-47 Thunderbolts for use at Okinawa. For whatever reasons, they didn’t show up.

In our daily news reports, we had been reading about 100-plane sweeps of P-47s in support of MacArthur's troops on Luzon. He had a reputation for hogging all the resources and his feelings about the Navy were well known.

We certainly could have used more air cover. The fleet carriers had moved north. They were bombing the Japanese homeland, keeping the enemy fleet bottled up, and trying to stop the waves of kamikazes from coming down on us.

During these days, our carriers were catching hell themselves. As it was, the Marine Corsairs were on their own, and that was all that we were to have in the way of air support.

There already had been one massive attack of about 500 kamikaze (suicide) bombers on the 8th, the day before our arrival.

“Kamikaze” means “divine wind” in Japanese. Several hundred years earlier, an invasion force from China had been wiped out by a typhoon, the “divine wind.” The Japanese were relying upon the same results from their suicide pilots, thus the name.

These suicide pilots were fanatical men, prepared to die a glorious death for the Emperor according to their code of Bushido. They believed that they would earn great honor and eternal life. We would be happy to oblige and give them their last wish, but it was scary to know that their single remaining purpose in life was to destroy us.

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We had a constant stream of alerts as small groups of bombers slipped through. Most of the air activity was at night—not conducive to a good night's rest. In fact, for the 10th and 11th of April I had a total of only two hours sleep in my bunk, supplemented by a few snoozes on the gun deck, using a life jacket for a pillow.

Japanese strategy was to use kamikaze planes to knock out our carriers, to gain air supremacy, and then to kill our destroyer picket ships to prevent their providing early warning of air attacks. That would also let their submarines penetrate our beachhead defense and attack the transports and supply ships.

A recently-published book about Okinawa refers to the picket ships as “The Sacrificial Lambs.” Thus, those of us serving on the picket ships were on our own suicide mission, although we didn't realize it at the time.

Before this battle was over, several thousand US Naval men were to perish in these attacks. It was to be our worst loss since Pearl Harbor. The casualties were so severe that the Navy stationed LSTs with their amphibious landing craft near the picket ships in order to pick up survivors as our ships were sunk.

Radio traffic had been heavy and I continued to do decoding duty when off watch. Every time I even thought about putting my head down, there was a radioman calling to me, saying, “Mr. Graves, there is an urgent and secret message to be decoded.”

Only officers could decode “confidential” or “secret” messages. These were usually messages to all ships in the task force bringing us up to date on the current battle situation. And of greatest importance to us, news of kamikaze raids expected on the picket line (raids on us).

For the 24 hours ending sometime on the 12th, we weren't able to leave our battle stations even for meals. The mess cooks brought sandwiches to us. We took turns running to the head, and maybe, if lucky, grabbing a snack in the mess hall. We caught short naps while at our battle stations.

Sometime in the middle of the night of April 11th, radar reported “snoopers” in our vicinity. One was circling around nearby, obviously looking for a target. By now the skies were clear, but there was no moon.

We were still patrolling on our picket line, with DEs and destroyers spaced about a mile apart. To reduce our phosphorescent wake, we had reduced our speed to seven or eight knots.

A flight of bombers came over and split up, with each individual plane seeking a target. Every time one came close, we would track it with our guns but didn't want to give away our position by opening fire. At night a plane had a better chance of hitting us than we of hitting it.

Finally it was obvious that one of the planes had spotted us. He was circling back

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to make a run on us, but no, he went for the ship astern of us.

We saw the bright flash of the exploding stick of bombs and phosphorescent fountains of water as the plane apparently straddled the other ship. A miss. Then all of the planes seemed to leave the area. A big relief, but no more sleep that night.

By dawn, we were back to condition yellow (enemy planes at about 50 miles), as we had been warned that another major kamikaze raid was on its way. Soon we could hear the radio chatter as the pickets to the north were coming under fire. It was 1325 hours.

FLASH RED! Enemy planes in the immediate vicinity, 20 miles. We had never left our battle stations.

At 1430 we started seeing the bogeys reported by radar a short time earlier. There were masses of enemy planes, as far as the eye could see. They were not in close formations. They looked more like the swarms of ducks that I used to see in the Sacramento Valley: irregular lines, small groups, large groups, splitting into smaller echelons.

As the kamikazes approached, our F-4U Corsairs were attacking everywhere. The Jap planes were burning and falling out of the sky. It was spectacular.

As I mentioned before, my battle station was in front of the pilot house. I was in charge of the forward 20mm battery (three guns). It doesn't sound like much but it was one third of our nine 20s.

Earlier that day, our anxieties had gotten a little prod when one of the quartermasters who had been monitoring the TBS radio reported the plight of another picket ship, the destroyer *USS Laffey* (now a war monument at the Naval Museum in Virginia). She had taken repeated Kamikaze hits.

One of our men in the radio room recorded the events of the continuing onslaught by the enemy planes. An officer aboard the *Laffey* was on the TBS radio requesting assistance. While giving a blow by blow description of the horrors going on, he was pleading for air support, medical assistance and a tow. The situation was desperate.

We saw the *Laffey* a couple days later at Kerama Retto in the cripples' anchorage. She was a battered hulk, barely afloat. It was a wonder she survived.

Now it was our turn. There were too many planes to even begin an accurate count. The later intelligence estimate put it at 500 planes.

In order to increase maneuverability, the Captain ordered full speed, eighteen knots.

One group of seven planes detached itself from a larger mass of planes and headed our way. Some of them had gull wings and fixed landing gear. They were "Val" dive bombers. Radar reported, "Bogeys approaching."