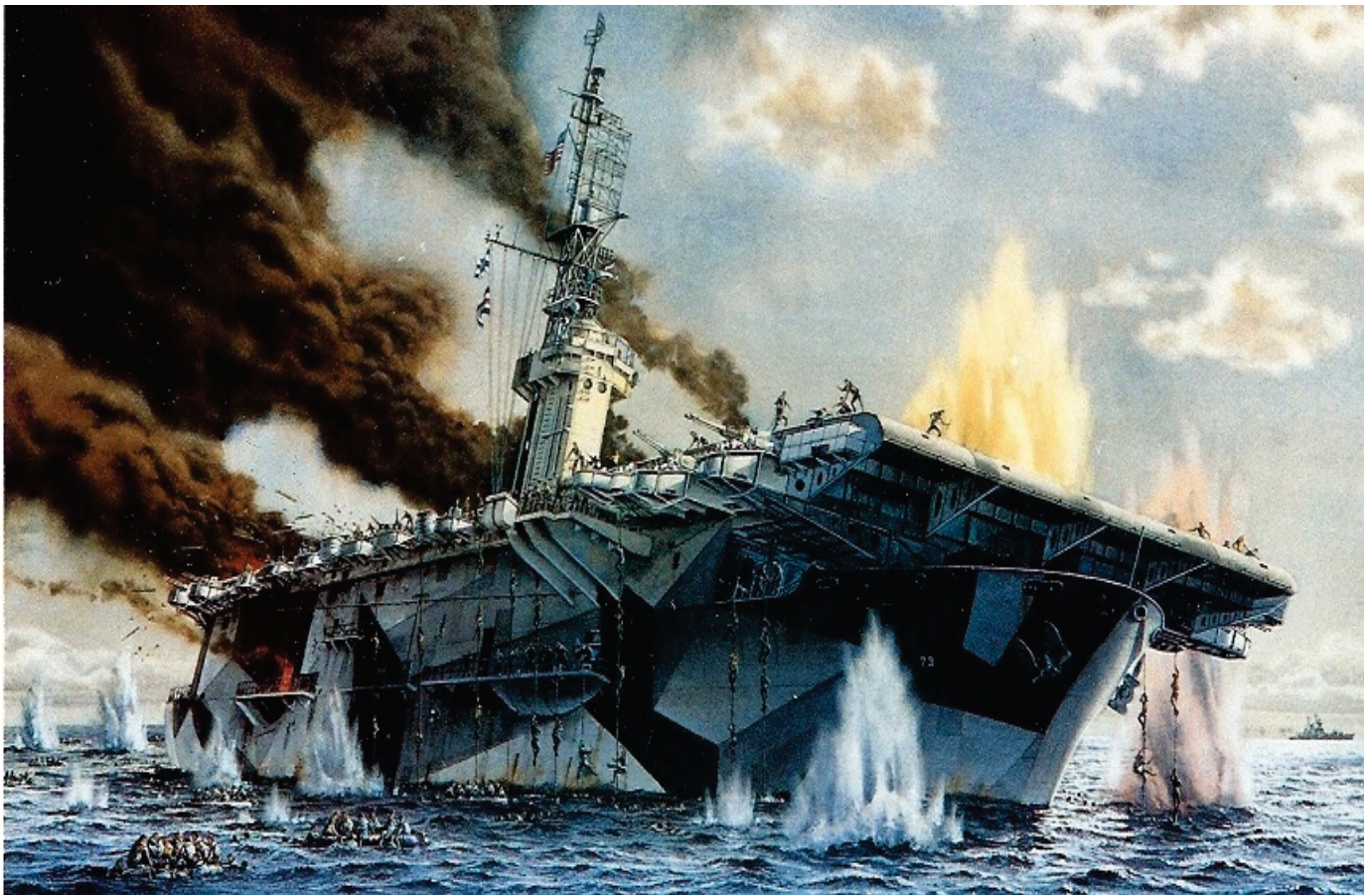


The Battle of Leyte Gulf

By Ariana Kanzé



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Epilogue

1 – Captain Hugh Goodwin

September rain poured against my window. I couldn't wait till it let up to check the news. I dashed into the storm and snatched the paper. I ran back in and flung off my soaked shoes and socks. No time now to be orderly; I would deal with them later.

I ripped off the wrapper and flipped to the section titled Kaiser Shipyard. At the top was a picture of a ship being constructed. It was scheduled to leave on November 22, 1943. The ship was a Casablanca class carrier. A baby flattop. No. 319 in the shipyard, christened *Gambier Bay*. The article continued:

The Gambier Bay will carry 30 planes. It will be in the Taffy 3 group, with three destroyers and four destroyer escorts. Taffy 3 will sail to the Philippine island of Samar to support ground troops.

I read the passage over and over. I had concerns. This type of ship was built quickly, without safety in mind. But I needed to get back on the water and fight.

I closed the paper. I leaned back and pictured the day my crew and I would be leaving the harbor. I was determined to make it happen.

...

I rapped at the door and waited for an answer...

“Hello?”

“Bob, it's me. Hugh.” The door opened.

“Hey Hugh, how are you?”

“I'm great! I read about the Gambier Bay in the paper this morning.” I walked over to the chalkboard, and searched for “Gambier Bay”.

“It's right here, Hugh.” Captain Bob Hickory pointed to the label CVE-73 at the bottom of the board. Next to it was a name. Not my name. My spirits dropped. I felt my excitement about the boat slip away... Then I had an idea.

“I have to get some lunch. You can stay here, Hugh.” I smiled and waved. Bob slammed the door. I picked up the eraser and quickly rubbed the other name away. Picking up the chalk, I wrote:

Captain Hugh Goodwin

I put the chalk down and left.

The next day I visited the office again. Lo and behold, the other name had reappeared. I erased it and put my name back. I had plenty of time. The other captain would definitely give up before November. I walked out of the room, feeling a little smug.

I found myself in a name war. Every day I would write my name in, and the next morning it would be gone. I was starting to worry. November was coming up soon. More weeks passed...

Only three weeks till the Gambier Bay launched, and the mystery captain showed no sign of letting up. I reluctantly pushed into the office and scanned the board. I jumped. The name next to the label CVE-73 was still my name!

I won the fight! The Gambier Bay was mine. I was so happy I did a victory dance around the office. Then I straightened myself out and went back to work.

2 – Jason

My eyes burned. I squeezed them shut. I drifted my mind and tried to sink into sleep. It was late. My eyes relaxed, my hands opened. Consciousness slowly slipped away.

Plip plop, Plip plop, Plip plop.

My eyes whipped open. Blackness bubbled and rippled around me. I closed my eyes, but the sound of the rain on the roof kept me awake. I fumbled in the dark for my lamp.

Click.

A warm glow illuminated the room, casting shadows of yellow and orange. I slipped from my covers and carefully made my bed. The cold floor bit my feet as I walked to the kitchen.

Water sparkled as it bubbled in the pot. I poured a bit of milk into my cup, then the water. Then a chocolate bar. I took a sip and let the warm creamy drink reanimate my limbs. I lit the fire and slipped into my armchair. Leaning back, I thought back about the day.

Crowds of people were cheering and clapping. The huge ship—the one I helped build—was in front of us. Behind it was the Columbia river, then the Pacific. The ship swayed and rocked. Just looking at it made me seasick. I admired how seamless the metal joints were. Before welding was invented we had to bolt the metal slabs together. It was hard and long work. Now we used a welder to make a seamless joint in minutes. This was also a safer way to make ships. With bolts, flooding was common. Now water can't get in.

Many of the ship's crew stood on a series of balconies along its side. They waved to their families and friends. The ship would be stopping at Port Angeles, Washington, then Los Angeles, California, to pick up more crew and supplies. I scanned the crew. Some were men, but most were still boys. Although they put up a good front for their families, they were terrified. A loud scraping. Doors opened. The crew shuffled in. An orange-haired boy turned around and waved one last time to a girl in the front of the crowd. The doors shut. The boys were gone. The air was tense. No one knew if they would see them again.

The ship glided out of the harbor and into the Columbia. It was deadly quiet, every pair of eyes glued to the slowly shrinking boat. The ship had a distinct shape. The shipyard had been in such a hurry to get this ship out that we used the hull of a merchant ship and fitted it with a new flight deck. We also made renovations. We made a hanger deck to store the thirty planes that the ship carried.

The ship was getting smaller but the giant letters across its side were still legible:

'U.S.S. Gambier Bay'.

3 – William

Water splashed against the boat. Staring down at the grayish green water made me uneasy. One wrong move and it could swallow you whole. In front of me was a crowd of people. I smiled at my sister. She was holding a banner, *'Bon voyage Gambier Bay!'* it said.

On each side of me were metal balconies, each with about twenty men. We were leaving the Kaiser shipyard harbor. We'll sail first to Port Angeles to collect supplies and more of our crew. Then we'll sail to Los Angeles, California, for more men and supplies. Then we head to war.

The water rocked the whole boat. The whistle blew once. The doors scratched open. Everyone around me slowly moved into the boat. I stood on the balcony until the last. I waved down to my sister Abigail. She smiled and gave a little nod.

Walking in, there was a long hallway with doors on either side. Our team leader was reading names, and pointing to doors. He called my name and pointed to the door about halfway down the hall. My feet clunked as I walked. Sitting down on my bed, I listened.

The whistle blew twice. I felt a jerk. We were moving. Away from our homes. Away from our families. Into a darkness none of us could imagine.

4 – Captain W. V. R Vieweg

I sat down, exhausted. Sweat rolled down my back. Cold air bit at my lungs. I felt I was going to faint. I heard a gentle knocking on the door.

“Hello?”

“Captain Vieweg, it’s time to go on.”

I sighed.

I don’t think I can do this.

I opened the door and peeked through.

“I can’t do this... Why don’t you go stand in for me?” I smiled wanly.

He stared at me and frantically shook his head. “Sir, I’m just the person that brings around little sandwiches in a basket. I couldn’t possibly. Besides they’re expecting you.” He slowly backed away.

I yelled down the hallway, “How about a promotion?” He continued down the hall, walking a bit faster. I sat back down on my bed. I heard a rapping at the door.

Again?

I opened it. I was confused. No one was there. There was a note outside on the floor. I read it aloud.

Hi Captain Vieweg.

You have to go on stage. Just sayin’. We’ll see you there, right?

Sincerely,

Roy, the sandwich boy

P.S. A promotion would be great. (:

I picked up the note and tossed it over my shoulder.

You’ve got this, you can do this.

I puffed out my chest and walked down the hall. I dashed over to a nook in the wall and pressed myself in.

You can't do this. You'll mess up. Everyone will laugh at you. Don't listen to him. You'll do great! Go out there and blow their socks off.

I walked down the hall. Suddenly I saw the bathroom, I dashed in and locked myself in a stall.

You can do it! No you can't! Yes you can! Don't listen to her! Don't listen to him!

I was starting to get fed up.

I don't have time to deal with you two right now. You need to work this out or you'll be grounded until you can. ... I'm sorry. I'm sorry too. But are you sure... STOP IT! IM IN CHARGE HERE!

Now that that was over, I was ready.

I walked backstage. Hugh was there to greet me.

“You ready?”

“I think I'm ready.” My palms sweated.

“You're OK?”

“I'm ready, let's go.” I saw Hugh disappear through the curtain, then took a deep breath. It was my turn.

I pushed open the curtain and stared at all the faces. I reminded myself that I had to be calm, and slowly walked over to the podium.

Hugh began, “Ladies and Gentlemen, we are here today to greet the new captain of the Gambier Bay.” The crowd exploded into noise. “Over the past year we've had many adventures together. We've come full circle and are back in Los Angeles. But it's time for me to move on. They have given me a new assignment. I am leaving Captain W. V. R Vieweg in charge. You are in good hands.” ...

He said more, but the pounding in my ears drowned it out. He finished. The crowd applauded. He looked at me, expectantly.

I started to walk to the podium. I tripped, but caught myself just before I hit the ground. I stood up, leaned into the microphone, and said, “Hello. Hi. I’m...” My mind blanked. I couldn’t remember my name. “Thank you, Hugh.” I was over-enunciating my words. “It. Was. An. Honor.” Everyone looked at me a little funny. Hugh came up and whispered.

“It is an honor.”

“Yes. What. He. Said.” I stepped away from the podium and hurried backstage.

That went pretty well. You totally blew it! What do you mean? That was a complete failure. Shhhhhh.

5 – William

I twirled a long pen in my fingers; I opened a leather journal. I got this for Christmas a few years ago, but had never written in it. I smoothed out the first page and began a journal entry.

October 12th, 1944

It's been a few days since we left the port in Los Angeles. We have a new captain, Captain Vieweg. The men are a little skeptical about him. He doesn't seem anything like Captain Goodwin.

The food is still bad; we're already getting sick. Just yesterday Captain Vieweg made an announcement not to eat the turkey sandwiches. They gave food poisoning to a lot of men already.

I've been training every day. They make me hit a moving target over and over again. The reason I'm on this boat is because I can hit a moving target.

My roommate Ken is a little weird, but nice. We've become friends. He's strong and likes to swim. He's a bomb loader.

I whipped around and slammed my book shut. Ken was standing in the doorway. I wondered how long he had been there.

"Want to get a bite to eat in the dining hall?"

I thought about the disgusting food and declined. Ken left, humming a tune.

I opened the book again and picked up my pen. I slowly signed my name at the bottom of the page

...William

I started to feel lonely. I stood up, opened the door, and walked down a desolate hallway to the dining hall. My footsteps echoed.

Thump thump, Thump thump, Thump thump.

I came to a heavy metal door. I pushed it open, then was thrown back. Loneliness imploded into noise. Rows and rows of tables. Behind them a food counter. Nasty looking dishes lined up. A cook pushed past me, carrying a dish of something clumpy and brown. Weaving through the maze of people, I found Ken's table.

"What's for dinner?" I asked him.

He held up a bowl of brown stuff and clinked a spoon against the side. "They say it's beef stew. It tastes more like beef pudding though. Want some?" He handed me the bowl. I pushed it back.

"This is what they expect us to eat? We're protecting the country! They couldn't give us chocolate cake or something?"

Ken's face lit up, "My theory is the chefs have all the good food hidden in the back. Keeping it to themselves!" He lifted the bowl, "I mean what chef would eat this?"

"I don't know." I answered, "But I guess we have to eat something."

The loudspeaker blasted, "ALL ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNMEN REPORT TO THE DECK!" I stood up. "Got to go. Bye Ken."

I walked fast. At the end of the hall was our commander's room. Every other day he held meetings to tell us what was happening on the boat and keep us up to date on the war. To the left was a staircase. I ran up the stairs and onto the deck.

Salty wind blew into my face; icy gray water lapped against the boat. Our slow movement made the whole boat rhythmically bounce and rock. On deck was a runway for planes. A huge cable stopped them when they landed. Each plane had a hook on its tail to catch the cable.

On both sides were rows of anti-aircraft guns. I walked over to mine. This was the only place on board where I felt safe. I felt the cold metal and examined the gun's condition. Good. The clouds passed slowly over the boat. The peaceful calm seemed almost too good.

...

Our ship was not built to fight. Our job is to keep 30 planes safe and give them a place to land and restock. Moving with us are three destroyers and four destroyer escorts. The destroyers and destroyer escorts are there to keep us safe. We are all called Taffy 3.

I turned to my team leader and saluted. He pointed to the ground and grunted something about pushups. This was going to be a *very* long day.

...

October 23th, 1944

We've been sailing for 13 days. The whole crew is tense. We are about to arrive at Samar.

William

I put down my pen and flipped the page. I knew that we were not able to send mail to our families. The Japanese might find it. But I needed to talk to someone who would understand how I was feeling. I started a letter.

Dear Abigail,

I know you will never receive this letter. I know that you have sent me letters I haven't seen. But I need someone to talk to. My roommate Ken is quirky. He sits on his bed most of the day, meditating. When he's not meditating he's thinking about food conspiracies. But he's very strong. A bomb loader was the right choice for him.

We are getting close to our destination. But with that comes war.

Sincerely, William

I ripped out the page and folded it up. I placed it gently on top of the journal.

Standing up, I waved to Ken. He was sitting on his bed, legs crossed, quiet. I needed to clear my head. I walked up onto the deck. No sound. No birds. No clouds. Even the water was quiet. Too quiet.

The quiet nagged at you. You noticed the absence of noise more than the noise itself. I went back down to my room.

"Ken, why aren't you training? We're arriving any day now."

He slowly opened his eyes. "I am training. A calm body is a calm mind. Would you like to join me?" I shook my head and sat down on my bed with a loud sigh. Ken closed his eyes and whispered, "Now be quiet."

...

I slowly opened my eyes and yawned. I looked over at my calendar. It was the 25th. I rolled out of bed and into my uniform. When I looked over at Ken's bed I got scared. Ken never got up until I woke him. Yet his bed was empty. I ran out and looked down the hall. Nothing! Then I got an idea. I ran into the dining hall. There he was, standing at the kitchen door.

His ear was pressed to the door; he was listening intently. I tapped him on the shoulder.

He flinched, then turned and gave me a big fake smile.

"Looking for conspiracies?" I asked him.

"Nope! I solved it. Now I'm looking for chocolate cake." I shook my head and sighed.

"Okay... what are you doing here?"

"I'm listening to make sure no one is in there." He pushed the door open and b-lined for the fridge. He opened it and pulled out a huge chocolate cake. He promptly stuck his hand into the center of the cake and pulled out a chunk. He shoved it in his mouth. Then offered the cake to me.

I reached out. I felt a strong engine come to life. I felt something heavy splash in the water. Then there was an explosion.

Sirens started to blare. The loud speaker blasted through the ship. It was Captain Vieweg.

"MEN, WE HAVE A WAR TO WIN. BATTLE STATIONS! GET OUT THERE AND DO IT!"

We froze. We had never heard the captain be direct and loud.

"NOW!"

We ran. Men were running frantically. I was squashed through a door and flung onto the deck. I looked out across the water. There at our doorstep was the entire Japanese fleet.

6 - Matome Ugaki

The water was still, very still. A fin shot up. A shark. Then it disappeared.

Tap, Tap, Tap...

“Yes?” The door swung open.

“Sir, we have spotted a group of ships on the horizon. Should we sound the alarm?”

“Can you see them clearly?”

“No sir. All we can see is their outline.”

I leaned back, absorbed in thought.

“Wait... They might be part of our group.”

“Yes sir!” The door slammed shut.

I studied the water. Should I have told the crew to go ahead? Should I leave the base unprotected to chase a *potential* threat? I leaned back. No, I need to protect the islands first.

...

The ships were getting closer; I peered through the telescope. I still couldn't tell. Were they part of our group? Were they Americans? We had known for weeks that an American task force may be coming around. But we also knew *our* ships were scheduled to come into Samar *today*.

I left my lookout and walked around the deck for a while. We can't identify the ships until they are only 10 miles away. There was nothing we could do but wait.

...

Alarm bells blasted through the ship. They sounded like they would melt your brain. I scanned the water. A group of American ships lay in front of us. Three destroyers and four destroyer escorts making a defensive circle around a group of six escort carriers. I wasn't too worried. We had an armada of cruisers and they had only a few small destroyers. I heard the command, “LOAD THE GUNS!” yelled across the boat. I ran up to the deck and started giving orders to the men. The air was tense.

Loud screeches came from every direction as the anti-aircraft guns ground into place. All the men running around made me dizzy.

Black smoke filled the air. The crew was coughing. The destroyers laid a smoke screen so the carriers could get away. Now we were facing off against seven little ships. The airplanes from the carriers were flying directly at us. There was no time to lose. We had a battle to win.

Dust and rubble exploded all over the deck. Our triple gun blasted across the sea at the destroyers. The smoke screen may have allowed the carriers to get away, but the destroyers were now vulnerable.

Every soul knew we were on the most powerful battleship of all time... the Yamato. A few destroyers wouldn't faze us. The range of their destroyer guns was only about 5 miles. Yamato's guns could hit a target 10 miles away. The Americans were in trouble.

7 – Commander Ernest Evens (U.S.S. Johnston)

The smoke screen was up. The carriers had moved a bit further from harm's way. They were still taking fire, though. Our boat was the closest to the Japanese ships. I listened to the command radio. No orders. Just static.

Are we supposed to just be sitting ducks?

I listened for another minute, then decided to take things into my own hands.

I knew we had to be within 5 miles of the Japanese ships to launch an effective torpedo strike. At that distance, though, one direct hit from the Yamato could kill everybody on board.

My plan is dangerous, but it's the only way.

I ordered our boat to head straight toward the Japanese cruisers.

Enemy rounds were hitting the water all around us. Water splashed on deck. The boat rocked and swayed as the water rippled against the edges.

The Japanese fleet was running away from our fire. They knew that we could only hit them at 5 miles. The range of the Yamato's guns, though, was at least twice that distance. I ordered the crew to follow the splashes. The Japanese built color into their ammunition. When a round hit the water, it would explode into color. This made it easy for the Japanese to tweak their aim. But their strategy gave us a leg up. We could follow the splashes and locate the Yamato.

I looked at the radar. 5-1/2 miles. Almost there. We had to make it half a mile more to launch a torpedo. I heard the high whine of a missile overhead. A fountain of colored water exploded and pushed a wave onto the boat deck. I sighed, we were safe, for now.

We're still out of range, but we have to do something.

I decided. "FIRE!"

The boat exploded in noise. The guns ground into line and chucked out round after round. I sat in the cockpit and examined the water. As we pushed forward the noise continued. After about 5 minutes the noise stopped. We must have fired 200 rounds. I looked at the nearest Japanese ship. I recognized it as the cruiser Kimono. We pressed forward.

We were in range. Enemy artillery had failed to score a single hit. "Prepare the torpedo!" I heard a pop, then a whizzing. The first torpedo was released. A line of bubbles followed the torpedo. Then silence. I listened.

There was a loud explosion. I stared. Kimono had been hit hard. The torpedo had completely blown the ship's bow off. The ship stopped. I saw men abandoning ship, jumping into the water.

Another ship, the Suzuha, pulled up to help the crew.

Only ten minutes into the battle, and two Japanese ships were already taken out. But there was no time to be proud. I yanked the ship to the right and focused on the path ahead.

...

The boat screeched and whined. The deck had gashes in it. We were not in good shape. I heard a missile, then I saw it land. "BOOM!" The deck was split. The Japanese battleship Congo was only seven miles away. How could we have been so stupid? We escaped one fight unharmed, only to be ambushed. The engine whined. The Congo's shells had sliced through the engine room. We were now moving at half speed, basically a sitting duck.

I started to turn back, then paused...

I can't just run, after everything I've put these boys through. I won't give up on them. Either way we'll go down. But at least this way we can fight.

I turned the boat straight toward the enemy ships.

8 – Pilot Jeremy Gray

The front of the plane lifted. The engine growled at the force of gravity trying to grab it back to the deck. The fight was on. The air rushed past my wings. I was at the end of the boat. The back lifted, and I was soaring. Below me was the Gambier Bay. Tiny men manned guns. They cleaned up wreckage from Japanese gunfire. The boat was not in good shape. Escort carriers weren't built to be in a major battle. I looked at the mess of flame, debris, and noise. I turned to the peaceful ocean.

Would I rather die of running out of fuel in the middle of the ocean, or die in the heat of battle?

I turned... toward the fight. A straight incline toward the Japanese ships. Terrifying? Maybe. But exhilarating? YES! I prepared the bomb, ready... set...GO!

I was diving at an increasing rate toward the Japanese ship, 'The Congo.' I was about 100 meters away... "Release!" The bomb was dropping, dropping.

I yanked my steering up and soared off just in time. The ship was infested in flame. I saw a few more planes do the same. I flew into the sky.

Dropping back down, I landed with a thud on the runway. The plane was speeding down the runway uncontrollably. I was heading toward the men... Then at the very last second, I felt a jerk. The tail had hooked. A couple of weeks ago the tail of one of our planes had not hooked. The plane went out of control. Luckily, no one was hurt. But we lost the plane.

I saw the bomb loaders on the right side of the ship. They restocked the plane. I was good to go.

The ship rocked and splashed as the enemy ships drew nearer. Fountains of colored water exploded from all directions. The sound of yelling was at that second overpowered by a screeching. Everyone looked up; an enemy shell was soaring through the air. It made a huge arc, then came down with a bang on the port side of the ship. Everyone exploded into chaos. Running, shouting, screaming. Lieutenants tried to get everyone under control. But to no avail.

I watched in horror. The damage support team rushed out. They assessed the damage. They looked grim. This was not good.

I took off again.

I could fly off into the distance and not have to deal with any of this anymore.

I looked out across the empty, peaceful sea. I made up my mind.

I sped away... toward the peace and calm. I looked back once more.

There was a soft humming. It was getting louder. I strained my neck to see who it was. My eyes widened, my jaw dropped.

Blazing into the fight were all the aircraft from Taffy 1 and 2. These men could have stayed on their ship. But they decided to come and help us have a better chance.

No matter what these men have done in the past, or will do in the future, they are all heroes.

...

I turned around and flew straight towards the Yamato. Yamato was leading the whole Japanese fleet. If we could take her out we would win.

The Japanese ships were being slowly pushed back by the force of our planes. They were turning from offence to defense. We were making progress. But the battle would continue until we could do some real damage.

I scanned the ship deck, I was trying to find a weak spot. There were none. I decided to go for the engine room. I took a deep breath, knowing it was the last one I would ever take.

I dove...

9 – Commander Ernest Evens (U.S.S. Johnston)

I looked out at the sea; so peaceful. I had a gut feeling that it wouldn't last long. We were moving at half speed, an easy target. I was correct. A second later there was a loud explosion.

I ran up to the deck and assessed the situation. The boat was in critical condition. Three shells had exploded the bridge. I ran to the damage control station, "Get out there and see what you can do."

"Will do sir!" The team ran out onto the deck. I sighed and ran down the steps.

The enemy fleet was slowly advancing. We didn't have much time. I sat watching the water for a few seconds, then made up my mind. The stairs clinked as I ran up. I heard gunfire. It wasn't Japanese. And our guns were destroyed. Who was it?

I ran onto the deck. The damage control group had brought back two of our guns. I was amazed. We were back online and firing. The Japanese ships were taking serious damage.

The ship was in horrible condition, I didn't want to do this to the men but we had to abandon ship. I moved to the middle of the deck, "ABANDON SHIP!!"

I walked to the edge; no one followed.

"COME ON! LET'S GO!"

No one moved.

The first mate tapped me on the shoulder, "We want to fight. We're not going anywhere."

"Ok, I'll allow you to stay. But you have to listen to me when we are in danger."

"Okay."

"Man the guns fire at anything you can key in on!" The men rushed up to the guns and started firing horribly aimed shots. I didn't blame them. It was asking too much to fire a straight shot while the ship was sinking. While I was looking out into the sea I had an idea.

"Cross the T. Now!"

"What?"

"Now!"

"Okay." The first mate ran down and turned the boat, but at our slow speed this would take forever. I just hoped we would get good luck again.

I froze. I picked up the sound of a torpedo swimming through the water. This is it, the Japanese torpedoes are fast and dangerous and... just bad. I held my breath, waiting for the explosion. Nothing. Five more seconds. Nothing. The sound got quieter and quieter. Our movement had caused the Japanese to fire prematurely.

They missed!

I let out my breath and sighed. We can't keep this up for much longer...

...

Shells were exploding all around. We were firing, but nothing was happening. The Japanese force was too strong. Suddenly the ship went up into flames. We were over. A fusillade cut the ship in half. We stopped. The engines were gone. We were dead in the water.

Enemy destroyers made a circle around us, firing relentlessly. We had made it for almost 3 hours; but now it was time to go.

“ABANDON SHIP!”

The men didn't hesitate. They jumped off the boat onto small life rafts. I pushed off. We watched as the ship slowly disappeared below the water. I would miss it. But all I could think about now was keeping my men alive.

10 – William

The air was tense. My ears were bombarded from all directions. I peered through my sight and tried to block out the outside world. Suddenly there was no more noise, no more tension in my arms. The cold metal that felt so bad before wasn't even noticeable. The gun grated as it turned to aim at the Japanese lead ship.

The sky was full of planes; diving at the boats, releasing their bombs. Explosions engulfed the Yamato. Our planes slowly but surely pushed the ships back.

BOOM!

The world exploded into noise. My ears went numb. I fell to the ground. My neck ached. My back hurt. Then screaming everywhere. Unbearable heat.

I slowly propped myself up and looked around.

A shell had exploded right next to my gun. Luckily the splinter shields had protected me. The gun was a different story. It was shattered. The whole boat was spinning. I tried to lift myself up... but fell back. It was no use. I lay back down and closed my eyes.

I jerked my eyes open. A loud explosion. Bigger than any I had ever heard. I looked around. "No..." I whispered under my breath. A shell had exploded in the cockpit. That was the last straw.

My heart beat hard and fast; I could feel the adrenaline pumping. Now the only thing I could think about was surviving.

As I stood up there were stabs of pain running through my back. The boat. It was in chaos. With all the running and yelling, I felt even dizzy. I started to close my eyes and lie back down when a friendly voice broke my trance.

"Hey Will, I don't know if you noticed, but we're kind of sinking."

I smiled, "I can tell."

"Well then, maybe you might want to get up?" He reached out his hand and helped me stand.

We walked over to the side of the boat.

"How far down do you think it is?" The height made me feel sick.

I started to back up. Ken grabbed my wrist.

"Oh, not far. "Where do you think you're going?"

“Ah... back to a gun. We are here to fight, remember?”

He turned around, “Do you see any guns? All I see is a few hundred men who are oblivious to what is happening.”

“We all know, Ken. The Japanese have won. We’re just a few men on some insignificant ships. We’ll be forgotten in no time.”

“No, Will, look!” He pointed into the distance. I was astonished. The Japanese ships were slowly, but surely running away. My jaw dropped.

“They surrendered?”

“Ya.. You were so caught up in being a drama queen that you didn’t notice that we won! You’re right, Will. We are just a few men on some insignificant boats. But we sure didn’t do anything insignificant. No one’s ever done this before. A few destroyers and carriers against the entire Japanese navy. We sure aren’t going to be forgotten, William!”

He pointed at the water, “What are we going to do about the cliff?”

I laughed, “I don’t know, Water we going to do?”

“No seriously, it’s like seven stories.” For the first time, I saw him look scared. “That would be one major belly flop.”

I nodded. I heard a yell. “Release the ropes!” Ten ropes unraveled down the side of the boat. Ken ran over to the ropes.

“Well, this is my way down. How about you?” The happiness of winning the war now subsided. I was still in a life or death situation. Now the happiness was overrun by fear. Shark infested water lay below. But it was no better on the boat. I closed my eyes and pushed off the deck.

The wind blew at my face and the air got colder and colder. Then with a splash, I hit the water. My whole body submerged. All I could see was blue and gray. The icy water bit at my face and my arms. I popped up breathing hard. My limbs were numb. I reached out and Ken pulled me onto the small yellow life raft.

I watched in horror as our surviving ships sailed off into the distance.

11 – Noah & William

Noah

I walked up to the metal door, a small piece of paper in my hand. Tapping on the door, I heard a sharp yell.

“Yes?”

The door swung open. I stared at a tall shadow.

“Sir, one of the planes intercepted a message going to the Japanese base at Samar. There are men—our men—floating in the Leyte Gulf off Samar. We need to help them.”

“Yes. Send a message to task group command.”

“Yes, sir.” I ran to the message center and peeked in.

“I need to send an emergency dispatch to the seventh fleet command. Tell them that in the Leyte Gulf off Samar there is a group of survivors.” One of the men stood up.

“I can do that.” I handed him the note. And he was off.

I waited to hear the response.

William

I gazed at the water. Another fin hurtled up. Another scream. Another pool of blood spilling into the water. Three days without water to drink. We were all weak, lightheaded, delusional. All hope was gone. We were just trying to stay alive for as long as we could.

Not everyone could fit on the rafts. Some of the men had lifejackets. But many would fall unconscious after a while of floating around.

I heard gagging. Then a head popped up. It was Captain Vieweg. He held up two bodies. I grabbed one. The captain threw the other on the raft. He waited for the men to regain consciousness. Once they woke up, the captain swam off again. He was searching the water for unconscious men. He didn't even care that he was exhausted.

Noah

We moved slowly through the water. A spotlight searched in front of us, but we didn't find anyone. We swept the water; back and forth. Looking for any sign of life.

After a few hours, we came across a small piece of scrap metal. As we went further, there were more and more signs that ships had sunk. Small pieces of debris here and there.

More hours of searching. Back and forth. The men couldn't have survived this long, especially with all the sharks. We were about to give up...

Then we saw a yellow dot. A yellow life raft. Then more yellow dots.

We pulled up to the rafts and deployed a ramp. We watched in horror as the men slowly pulled themselves up. Their clothes were shredded, their limbs were cut. They looked like skeletons. But they were alive.

William

As the spotlight fell on our raft, I reached out weakly. Clinging onto the metal ramp, I slowly pulled myself up into the boat. I fell into a warm room.

Stand up!

My arms and legs were completely numb. Hard to move. Impossible to stand. Still, I was lucky. So many men were eaten by sharks. So many died of dehydration. So many froze to death. Ken floated in the water for three days, giving up his space in the raft to help others. Then during the night, he disappeared.

Once the rescue ship got all the survivors, they took us to the hospital on Samar. Captain Vieweg had documented the whole battle as it happened. In the hospital he shared the full story with us. He told us that more than 800 men had been rescued from the water after the ship went down.

We learned later that 147 of our crew members had died in the battle.

Dear Abigail,

We are leaving the hospital today. In a few days, I will be home and we can celebrate. But in the meantime, I found this newspaper article that I thought you might want to read.

Sincerely, William

Americans Win Leyte Gulf War!

On October 25th, 1944 an escort carrier, the Gambier Bay, entered one of the most important naval battles of the war. In the battle, the Americans destroyed many Japanese ships. The remaining Japanese ships fled.

The U.S.S. Johnston was a small destroyer that fought like a battleship. It took out two of the Japanese cruisers in the first ten minutes of battle. Most importantly, this battle restored the pride of the American fighters.

The Philippines are now in American possession. The army has freed the Filipinos from Japanese rule, and the air force has set up a landing strip to launch B-29s for attacking the Japanese mainland.

This battle took place just off Samar (the Leyte Gulf) in the Philippines. The survivors were rescued by the seventh fleet flagship, part of task group 78.12.

12 – Matome Ugaki

Outside a gentle rain was tiptoeing through the grass. I glanced out the window. The last glimmer of sunlight disappeared behind the trees. I tiptoed down the small hallway.

I gently slid the door open and smiled. A small futon in the middle of the sweet-smelling tatami room snuggled my young daughter. I sat down.

“Sora, what story would you like tonight?”

“Papa, why did they blow up our home and kill so many people with those horrible bombs?”

I sighed. I had hoped that she would never ask that question. I touched her hair gently. “Sora, there’s no need to worry about that now. That was years ago, during the war. Now you’re safe. Go to sleep.”

“Is it because they were mad that you and your big boat hurt their people?”

There was no way out now. I had to tell her. “No Sora. It’s not that. We just didn’t ‘win’.”

“Why not, Papa?”

“Well, we didn’t want to hurt so many of our people or their people. So we left the battle. We had done enough damage.”

“But you could have won, right?”

“I don’t know. But I didn’t want to see if I could. We didn’t want to kill so many people. It wouldn’t have been honorable.”

“Ok, Papa. I’m going to sleep.”

“All right. Sleep well.”

I walked out of the room. The sky was dark now. I watched the last shimmer of light disappear.

I know that’s not what the American history books say. I just wish I could tell them our side of the story.

13 – William

I pulled up and got out of the car. The gate opened. I stared into the courtyard. A tear rolled down my cheek. In front of me was the Kaiser shipyard. Balloons and banners were flying.

Everyone was standing in a semi-circle around the gate. I walked in. There was no one else from my crew there. I went up to my sister, whispered to her. “Abby where is the rest of the crew?”

She looked confused.

“Will, don’t you know? You’re the only one left.” My jaw dropped open.

“I’m the only one left?”

“Will this is the last reunion. Everyone else is gone.”

A man stepped onto the podium. “Ladies and Gentlemen. Today, in the place where the Gambier Bay was born, we remember her and the men who were brave enough to fight when they had no chance.”

I thought back. I remembered when I had been on the boat, leaving the Kaiser shipyard. I was terrified. It was so long ago. I had no idea what was ahead of me.

Then the battle came back to me. Even though it was the worst experience of my life, I wouldn’t trade a second of it for anything.

...

After the ceremony, my granddaughter Remy was sitting by herself. I walked over and sat down. “Baba, tell me the story!”

“You’ve heard already it a thousand times.”

“Once more! Please?”

“All right. Listen carefully! I don’t want this story to die with me. As long as this amazing tale is still being told, everyone in the battle will still be alive.”

“I’m listening, Baba.”

“It all started in this very shipyard...”

Epilogue

I clutched the packet in my hand. The line stopped. Strange wonderful sounds engulfed me. Waterfalls in an airport! And strange wonderful smells: Rice, Miso, and Ramen. American airports are just noisy and smell like stale popcorn.

We continued moving. I looked out across the big open room. So many people.

I scanned the people on the other side of the divider, I was looking for my name.

No. No. No. Ah ha!

A family was waving a big sign. It said 'REMY'. I walked up to them and bowed.

"Hello."

"Remy?"

"Yes, I am Remy."

"Hello, Remy. Welcome to Japan!"

"Thank you! Hi!"

I gave them the packet. This was the Japanese family who would host me while I studied in Japan.

...

I couldn't sleep. I silently rolled out of my futon and tiptoed across the room. I aimlessly wandered down the hall.

I came to a sliding door. Slowly I slid it open and stepped into the room. A small light abruptly popped on. I looked in on a small room.

I didn't mean to be nosey, but my feet had a mind of their own. They brought me to a closet. My hands slowly pushed the doors open. I looked in; my jaw dropped...

A picture on the wall was of a ship. THE ship... The Yamato... The ship that had killed so many of my grandfather's friends.

Why does this family have a picture of The Yamato?

Next to the picture was a letter. It was addressed to Sora, the mom of my host family, from Matome Ugaki.

I recognized the name... That name... The man who commanded the Yamato during the battle. I was so confused. Why did this family have all this stuff?

I jumped. A voice spoke softly behind me,

“I haven’t looked at those in years.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude. I’ll just go back to bed.” I started to walk away.

“Nonsense. I know you have questions. What good are they if they’re not answered?”

“Ok, how do you know Captain Ugaki?”

“Well, because he was my father. How do you know his name? They don’t teach such things in school anymore.”

I felt like the air was being sucked out of me. How did I end up here? With them?

“Remy?”

“That man... Your father. He killed my grandpa’s best friend. He almost killed my grandpa.”

Sora looked confused.

“You’re saying that my dad and your grandpa knew each other?”

My face was starting to turn red. I couldn’t stay with these people. I wanted to go back to America. My breathing quickened. I felt myself go over the edge. Then I exploded...

“NO, THEY DIDN’T KNOW EACH OTHER. YOUR DAD ALMOST KILLED MY GRANDPA, MY DAD, ME. HOW CAN YOU BE OK WITH THIS? YOUR DAD KILLED A LOT OF INNOCENT PEOPLE. THEY DIDN’T DESERVE TO DIE. THEY DIDN’T DESERVE TO DIE!”

Sora calmed me, “Remy, you don’t know what happened on the Japanese side of the story. Do you?”

“No...” I was slowly losing pressure. “My grandpa told me the story, though, when I was little.

“Ok, why don’t I tell you the other side ... our side? You can tell me yours.

It's about time for both sides of the story, don't you think?"

I nodded.

"It's about time for people to know the truth. All sides of the truth."