

BILL BRYSON

I became a Tin Can Sailor on October 8, 1944 when I swung aboard the USS Burns (DD 588), a Fletcher class destroyer operating with Task Force 38 in the Pacific. Joining my first ship involved transportation on a troop transport, an ammunition ship and culminated in a mail bag highline transfer at sea from the USS Reno (CLAA 96).



Two days after reporting aboard, our task group came under air attack from Japanese shore-based aircraft. As I rushed to my general quarters station, a Japanese twin engine torpedo plane, trailing smoke and flames, crashed into the water near the USS Burns. A giant explosion heaved a huge geyser of water into the air. Black balls of smoke from anti-aircraft guns filled the sky over our task group. Automatic weapons' tracers arched through the sky, fiery fingers seeking out the attackers. Additional planes, trailing smoke, splashed into the water around us together with a deadly rain of shrapnel from our anti-aircraft guns. It seemed unreal to me, like watching a war movie. Another plane crashed near the ship, jarring me into realizing that I was in this "movie." I had found the ship I had been seeking for over two months, and the Pacific war had found me. Three months later, the USS Burns left Task Force 38 and joined Task Force 77 for the Philippine Islands invasion. Near the end of 1944, with only a few scattered remnants of Japan's once formidable naval air corps remaining, the Japanese formed a Special Attack Corps of suicide pilots called "kamikazes" or "divine wind." Pilots of this group intended to sacrifice themselves by flying their planes into our ships.

The kamikaze was a fearsome weapon since we knew the man attacking fully intended, and expected, to die in the attack. Pilots did not have to be proficient with their weapon systems because they were the weapon system! Tragically for these volunteers, the war was nearly over for Japan at this time, and those attacks could not turn the tide of a war already lost. In January 1945, I witnessed the devastation caused by a single kamikaze attack in the invasion of the Philippine Islands. It occurred during a successful attack on the USS Ommaney Bay (CVE79), an escort carrier in our task unit. Our unit was one of four groups in Task Group 77.4, an escort carrier force in the Lingayen Gulf invasion of the Philippine Islands comprised of six escort carriers and six screening destroyers.

BILL BRYSON

On the afternoon of January 4, two days before the invasion of Lingayen Gulf, we were steaming in company with Task Group 77.2, a bombardment and fire support group that consisted of several battleships. Total embarked aircraft, of the escort carriers in our group, amounted to 160 fighters and bombers.

This operation commenced when the USS Burns sortied from Manus in the Admiralty Islands on December 27, 1944 to rendezvous with Task Group 77.2. The voyage from Manus to Leyte Gulf was uneventful but the situation deteriorated rapidly as we passed through Surigao Strait. On January 2, 1945, one of the accompanying oilers received a hit from a kamikaze, but the damage was not serious. Bogeys (enemy aircraft) started showing up frequently on the radarscopes on January 3, but our Combat Air Patrol (CAP) kept enemy planes at bay during the day.

As we approached Mindoro Strait, shortly before 1700 on January 4, our task unit identified a raid of fifteen planes at a distance of forty-five miles. This attack, however, did not materialize, and we secured from General Quarters. Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, a twin engine Japanese bomber dove into the USS Ommaney Bay (CVE79). The aircraft slammed into the starboard side of the flight deck.



Carrier Escort

One of its bombs exploded below the deck, causing planes above to catch on fire, adding to the damage. The USS Burns went to General Quarters, and proceeded to the vicinity of the stricken carrier to render assistance along with the USS Bell (DD587), a sister ship in our division. Our Captain was in tactical command of the rescue unit. We put our motor whaleboat and Captain's gig in the water to rescue survivors who had abandoned ship. Other destroyers in the group also assisted in rescue operations. About thirty minutes after the kamikaze hit, we went alongside the carrier to rescue men trapped on the burning flight deck.

My battle station, in the Mk 37 Gun Director above the bridge, afforded me a close-up view of the rescue operation, but kept me from participating directly. I felt helpless as I witnessed the death of a proud ship and the agony of her crew. Heat from the raging fires on the carrier enveloped us as the USS Burns placed her bow against the carrier's forward flight deck to rescue three trapped men. While they lowered themselves to our forecastle deck using ropes, my concern for our ship's safety rose as small-caliber ammunition in the ready magazines of the USS Ommaney Bay started to explode. This was due to the intense heat from the aircraft fires on the hanger deck. Suddenly, a thunderous explosion shook the USS Ommaney Bay and showered us with debris. Bombs on aircraft in the hanger deck started to explode. The USS Burns quickly departed the

BILL BRYSON

immediate vicinity of the stricken ship. Fortunately, the large explosions did not injure any of our crew, but the blasts killed two men on another destroyer nearby. A large chunk of metal from the carrier struck our 5-inch 38 gun-loading drill platform by the after deckhouse. The platform disappeared over the side, leaving only the leg stumps where it had been welded to the deck. I shudder to think what might have happened had that piece of the carrier hit our ship in a more vulnerable location.

The tremendous explosion collapsed the flight deck and sealed the carrier's doom. Fires spread throughout the ship turning it into a blazing inferno. All remaining members of the crew appeared to have abandoned ship by this time. After rescue destroyers completed a thorough search for any survivors in the surrounding waters, the USS Burns sank the Ommaney Bay with a single torpedo at 1954 hours. It struck the ship with a tremendous blast, and broke the mortally wounded carrier in half. Pieces of the ship splashed into the water around us, but fortunately none struck our ship. Within six minutes after impact, we sadly watched the USS Ommaney Bay sink beneath the sea.

The USS Burns rescued 158 officers and men that night. At 2345, we went alongside the USS Mississippi (BB41) and transferred Ommaney Bay survivors. The carrier lost ninety-five men killed and sixty-five wounded in the kamikaze attack. The USS Burns returned to Seattle on March 1, 1945 for overhaul. It was an especially joyous occasion for me since Ann and I were married at St. Mathew Episcopal Church in San Mateo on March 3, 1945. After a short honeymoon in Carmel, we returned to Seattle to begin our life together. Six weeks later the USS Burns departed once again for the Pacific war, joining a cruiser-destroyer force supporting the invasions at Brunei Bay and Balikpapan, Borneo during June and July. The end of the war found the ship at Naha, Okinawa. The USS Burns spent the next six months as part of the occupation force in China and Korea before returning to San Francisco in February 1946 to be placed in the Reserve Fleet. Soon afterwards, I reported aboard my second tin can for duty as gunnery officer.