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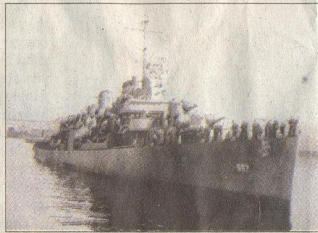
ARTSDAY

Game addicts

Some people spend their lives figuring out ways to become contestants on game shows. 12E



Destroyers such as the USS Johnston were nicknamed tin cans by the Navy.



HOPE FLOATS

His destroyer sunk after one of WWII's fiercest battles, Euless resident Bill Mercer relives the two days and nights he waited in the water for a miracle



MONA REEDER/Staff Photographer

By **CHRIS WHITLEY**
Special Contributor

Six decades ago, Bill Mercer fought the Japanese, torpedoes, sharks, dehydration and delirium. Now he's fighting congestive heart failure, diabetes, a broken hip and time.

He is a lifetime and half a planet removed from the horrors of that World War II battle as he relaxes in a recliner in his Euless home. A walker stands next to his chair. In this setting, he is grandfather, husband and retired chief of security for General Motors' Arlington plant.

PEOPLE

Yet just mention the USS Johnston and suddenly, he's 18 again. The fresh-faced kid from Bridgeport is in the South Pacific seeing the world and fighting the good fight.

On the morning of Oct. 25, 1944, a Japanese attack sank the Johnston as well as four other ships in their over-matched fleet. Mr. Mercer survived the barrage of explosions that killed others around him. He also survived a two-day ordeal with hundreds of others adrift in the South Pacific before they were rescued.

Mr. Mercer, who will turn 78 on May 20, said he has thought about that battle every day of his life.

"When I got up that morning I was 18, but when we got done, I felt like I was 40," he says.

The events of that battle, part of what is known as the Battle of Leyte Gulf, have been documented in a book published this year titled *The Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors*. Author James D. Hornfischer, who lives in Austin, wanted to pay tribute to Mr. Mercer and the other sailors who fought off the Japanese advance.

Despite sinking five American ships, the Japanese fleet turned around after the two-hour battle, which the book calls "the U.S. Navy's finest hour."

See **A BATTLE** Page 2E

LEGACY AT SEA

On Oct. 25, 1944, during part of what became known as the Battle of Leyte Gulf, a small U.S. Navy flotilla encountered some of the most powerful battleships and cruisers that Japan possessed — and held them off.



DAMEON RUNNELS/Staff Artist

RESOURCES

For more information about the Battle of Leyte Gulf:

■ **Tin Can Sailors of Texas** (tin-can.org):

Under the "Battles" section, read Bill Mercer's complete account of what happened to him during the Battle of Leyte Gulf and how he says he is "grateful but probably never as grateful as I should be."

■ **The USS Johnston-Hoel Association Web site** (www.ussjohnston-hoel.bigstep.com):

The site contains some useful background on the battle and lists the survivors and casualties. Although its news page hasn't been updated in a couple of years, it tells how the group started reuniting in the early 1980s.

■ **The Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors home page** (www.tincansailorsbook.com): Author James D. Hornfischer's site has photos and maps of the Battle of Leyte Gulf, plus a bulletin board for readers to post messages about the book and the battle.

People

A battle frozen in time

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With last weekend's opening of the World War II memorial in Washington, its dedication on Memorial Day weekend and next month's 60th anniversary of the D-Day invasion of Normandy, Americans will be focusing on the "Greatest Generation." But Mr. Hornfischer says the engagement that nearly cost Mr. Mercer his life is often overlooked.

"There's this institutional legacy that means something within fairly narrow circles, but the public knows very little about the Navy's valor in this specific case, which is easily the greatest David vs. Goliath story, the greatest instance of the tables being turned on a superior naval force in history," Mr. Hornfischer says.

Before the battle

Mr. Mercer was in the first division on the 40mm gun crew of the USS Johnston and sailed with the ship since it was commissioned in Seattle on Oct. 27, 1943. The Johnston was a destroyer, or "tin can" as the Navy dubbed them, that joined six other ships in protecting six aircraft carriers off the Philippine coast.

Adm. William Halsey's Third Fleet protected the tin cans off the island of Samar. Yet the night before, without the tin cans knowing it, Adm. Halsey headed north to pursue a Japanese fleet that was actually a decoy. Another Japanese fleet steamed in, and the tin cans were on their own.

Mr. Mercer spent the night before the battle on lookout duty, so he was asleep when the alarms rang that morning. He got up slowly, thinking it was a routine drill, until a crewmate told him Japanese ships were spotted on the horizon. As he hurried to his battle station, he spotted a cook.

"How about some bacon? It may be the last I ever get," Mr. Mercer said.

Almost immediately, Japanese shells landed in the water off the bow.



Six decades ago, Bill Mercer (third from right) fought the Japanese during WWII.

"We figured that was our demise. I was wondering how my mother was going to handle that."

Bill Mercer,

on his ship's battle with an overpowering Japanese naval fleet,

"I lost my appetite," he says.

The American ships were outnumbered, outsized and outrun by the Japanese fleet, which included the Yamato, one of the two largest warships in the world at the time. Shells bombarded the Johnston, starting fires, hurling sailors into the air and ripping off limbs.

Mr. Mercer moved to the side of the ship where a group of sailors was stationed. An incoming round came in behind him and killed everyone standing there.

The ship was going down fast. When the captain ordered the crew to abandon ship, Mr. Mercer dived off the port side and swam about 100 yards. He joined a group that hung on to a nylon mesh floater net connected to some life rafts and waited for rescue.

Adrift

The rescue was supposed to be quick. Eight American ships were within range to pick up the stranded survivors. But they were spread out among 30 miles of ocean, drifting unpredictably.

"I remember everything that happened during my stay in the water," Mr. Mercer says.

He remembers the smell of diesel fuel that oozed into the water. He remembers having to punch and kick sharks that seemed to lurk all

around him. He remembers that some around him did not survive the sharks. He remembers the madness that befell others as sleep deprivation and dehydration set in.

Then, on the morning of Oct. 27, Mr. Mercer's crew sighted a band of small ships. He feared they were Japanese until they got close enough to see what he described as "the beautiful American flag." They were hauled onto a landing craft and taken to safety.

He had survived, one of 145 that made it from a crew of 329.

When asked what he first did after the rescue, Mr. Mercer says, "I did a lot of praying."

The Johnston was the only ship Mr. Mercer ever served on. After the war he returned to Texas and started seeing a woman named Shirley Bird. They were married in 1948 and are together still.

Like the other survivors, Mr. Mercer set out on making his own life outside the war, but years later he attended reunions of the group. He even headed an association of survivors related to the Johnston and a sister ship that sank, the USS Hoel.

He, like the others, needed to be around people who shared that experience. Bobby Chastain, a fellow Johnston crew member who lives in Woodway near Waco, says that's

why he started getting the group together about 20 years ago.

"It's more of a lifelong bond. We really went through something that no one else should have to go through," Mr. Chastain says.

Losing a link

The numbers of Johnston survivors, like those of all World War II veterans, are thinning. While there are no official figures of remaining Johnston crew members, the Department of Veterans Affairs estimates 1,100 people who served during the war die each day.

Mr. Mercer broke his hip about six months ago and his wife, who cares for him now, says his health hasn't been the same since. He has trouble getting around. His memory isn't as sharp as it once was.

Mrs. Mercer acknowledges that they probably will be unable to attend a 60th anniversary get-together of Johnston survivors this October in San Diego.

As Mr. Mercer sits in the recliner, the pain brings him back from the 18-year-old he was in memory. He's once again a husband and grandfather from Eulless. He's lived a full life, whereas others he knew long ago did not.

When asked what made the difference between life and death, he says simply, "I don't know. Faith and the good Lord, I suppose. Life's treated me well."

Chris Whitley is a Dallas freelance writer.