

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH LT(ret.) WALTER BURWELL, MC, USN

CONDUCTED BY
JAN K. HERMAN, HISTORIAN, BUMED

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OFFICE OF MEDICAL HISTORY
BUREAU OF MEDICINE AND SURGERY
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Telephone interview with Dr. Walter Burwell, World War II physician aboard USS *Suwannee* (CVE-27), 16 February 1994, Henderson, NC.

Where were you born?

Right here in Henderson, NC, on November 25, 1916.

Where did you go to medical school?

I was in the class of '41 at Tulane. As a matter of fact, I was doing my internship at Charity Hospital in New Orleans when the war broke out at Pearl Harbor.

How did you end up in the Navy?

That was in December of '41. The whole affair caught me by surprise. I was not aware that there was any particular tension in the Pacific, being so completely immersed in an internship.

I guess after the implications of Pearl Harbor sank in--it took about a month before it did so--I went down to the Navy recruiting station and volunteered for service. They accepted me but did not call me to active duty until I had completed my internship in July of '42. Then, on being ordered to active duty, I had to go through another physical examination. The Navy worked in strange ways. Though I was in New Orleans and had signed up in the recruiting station there, they sent me back to my home naval district to take the final physical at Charlotte, NC. At least that gave me an opportunity to come home and visit my mother before leaving for active duty.

Following that, I entered active duty at the Norfolk Navy Yard in Portsmouth, VA. I think it was around August 4, 1942, I was there for a little over a month working in the dispensary of the Navy Yard. Then I got orders to the *Suwannee* which was under construction over in Newport News. I guess I was there about a week before the ship was formally commissioned on September 24, 1942.

I think it had been an oiler before being converted.

That's right. There were four of them, the *Suwannee* (CVE-27), *Chenango* (CVE-28), *Santee* (CVE-29), and *Sangamon* (CVE-26). In those days, the Navy named their oilers after rivers. My understanding is that these ships had been built as oilers with a subsidy from the Navy so that in case of a national emergency, they could be taken over by the Navy and used as oilers or converted to aircraft carriers.

Do you remember your impression of the ship when you went aboard?

A lot of confusion because it was still swarming day and night with workmen in the Navy Yard. Everything smelled of acetylene

torches and there was litter and trash everywhere. When we finally did go into commission, we went on a so-called shakedown cruise. We spent about two weeks in the Chesapeake Bay, during which we ran the degaussing range, calibrated instruments, took aboard ammunition, faced a few gunnery practices, and landed planes aboard before coming in to the Naval Operating Base in Norfolk for final provisioning. I remember one night we were anchored in the Bay when a merchant ship ran down our picket boat and sank it without stopping so that we had to put out another whaleboat to rescue the crew. We had a skipper named Jocko Clark [Joseph J.], later admiral, who was red hot to get into action. When we left on our way to North Africa, workmen were still trying to complete some jobs before getting off in time to avoid going to North Africa with us.

I really don't believe there were more than two people aboard who had ever been to sea or even across the Chesapeake Bay for that matter. Maybe the captain and the navigator. We were complete green horns and didn't know what was going on. In one way that was an advantage because we didn't have the sense to worry. But as we gradually gained experience, we began to realize that this was not just a game. For instance, I remember when one of our torpedo bombers loaded with depth charges missed the barrier and went over the side. The crew got out and they were waving to us as we came abreast of them. Then the depth charges exploded and they were all killed right under our eyes. It was such a helpless feeling!

What did the Suwannee's sick bay look like?

We had one standard hospital bed and I think about 4 tiers of 3 bunks one on top of another. We also had an operating room, and adjacent to that, a pharmacy and a sick call area, and a dental office. I think we must have had about 12 corpsmen and a chief pharmacist's mate. For the ship's company, we had a senior medical officer and I was the junior medical officer. Each squadron usually brought a surgeon with them. Of course, we all worked together. Many times I would spell the flight surgeon on certain duties or he would spell me. Some flight surgeons, however, were only interested in the psychiatric part of health care for the pilots. I remember one flight surgeon who spent all his time in the ready room talking to the pilots and building model airplanes.

You had one dentist aboard?

We sure did; he was part of our Ship's Company Medical Division. Of course, he would help out with first aid, health and sanitation inspections, and things like that. The dentist was kept pretty busy with his dental duties, because in those days the general public had

pretty poor dental hygiene. And a lot of these boys coming aboard had probably never seen or heard of a dentist before. The condition of their teeth was terrible and he was always busy just trying to get them into shape.

What was the crossing like going over to Africa?

It wasn't bad going over, as I recall. We rendezvoused in Bermuda with the "greatest amphibious force in history." I was told at the time that this was the largest armada that had ever been assembled. I don't know how true that was. But it did look pretty big to me. There were ships everywhere across the horizon.

One peculiar situation that most people these days might not realize. We were assigned to support amphibious landings in North Africa until an airfield could be secured. And our carrier force was loaded with an extra complement of 70 Army P-40s in addition to our regular complement of Navy fighters and torpedo bombers. When we got to North Africa we catapulted those Army P-40s and their pilots off. Of course, they couldn't come back to land on our ships. They were supposed to attack and then find a place to land in North Africa. Apparently it worked.

When we were off the coast of Casablanca, in addition to supporting the landings, one of our missions was to attack and silence heavy shore batteries and the French battleship *Jean Bart*. With the help of other elements of the task force, our torpedo bombers successfully silenced the French ship. They did knock it out of commission along with help of the task force. The *Jean Bart*, you know, had been encased in concrete converting it into a fortress in the harbor of Casablanca so it wasn't possible to sink it. But two French submarines were sunk by aerial attack and French cruisers and destroyers attempting to clear the harbor were sunk by naval gunfire and our bombers. We were the first CVE to sink a submarine.

On the way back to Bermuda, we ran into a terrific storm with a 59-knot gale. Tremendous waves peeled back the forward part of our flight deck, and this had to be repaired when we returned to the Navy Yard. In the midst of the storm, an unfortunate sailor got appendicitis. Thank goodness our senior medical officer was a surgeon, so he was able to do the appendectomy. At that point, I had only completed a year of internship and I had never done an appendectomy alone. We hadn't even had a chance to unpack and distribute our medical supplies. But I remember we did find enough materials to be able to operate on the sailor. It was so rough that we had to tie ourselves to the operating table to maintain our position while we operated because of heavy pitch and roll of the ship to 27 degrees!

When we returned to the Navy Yard for repairs to the flight deck, we had radar facilities installed, which we had been without until then because it was something completely new. We then had 48 hours of leave. I caught the train from Norfolk to Henderson, which is not far, and visited my mother. And then back to the ship and off we went through the [Panama] Canal to get to the Pacific. When we went through the Canal, our skipper was in such a hurry to get out there to combat that he couldn't wait for the proper clearance to go through one of the locks. As a result, we knocked off part of our signal yardarm on a control tower trying to get through. But it was minor damage and it was repaired without delay, though one of our sailors was injured and lost some fingers in attempting to clear the wreckage. We knew we would be at sea for Christmas, so we bought a Christmas tree to take along. We celebrated Christmas Day by dressing the ship and wearing dress whites all day.

Did you stop at Pearl on the way over?

No. We went to Noumea in New Caledonia and amazed the South Pacific veterans by steaming into the harbor with officers and crew at quarters in whites. We were there only a day or two. Then we headed north up to Havannah Harbor, Efate Island, where we hid out in the harbor there. I didn't know the strategy involved but from time to time we'd sortie out and run up the "Slot" to Guadalcanal and then back again. On one of these runs, we were covering transports with Army troops moving into Guadalcanal when the USS *Chicago* (CA-29) was torpedoed and the next day attacked again and sunk while it was under tow despite coverage by our planes. On another occasion, we joined up with the *Chenango* and *Sangamon*, four cruisers, and four old battleships and went to the northeastern approaches to the Solomons because we expected the Japanese to attempt to reinforce Guadalcanal. But it turned out that the "Tokyo Express" was actually evacuating their troops rather than reinforcing.

I remember when we first pulled into Efate Island, the skipper wanted to send a landing party ashore to see what was going on. I, being the junior medical officer, naturally was elected to go along with the landing party. We were instructed to put on our whites, land, and contact any natives we could find there. Luckily there were no Japanese on the island but I'll never forget us stepping ashore in whites with flags flying and being greeted by two or three natives who worked on a coconut plantation there. But within a very short time we had established an officers' club and a recreation area. Efate Island is not far and just south of Espiritu Santo, where we sometimes rendezvoused.

We went back to California in September of '43--Alameda--for resupplying, refurbishing, things of that kind. From there we went down to San Diego. I remember as we came down the California coast, we encountered great, rolling surf as the waves came in to the shore. The weather was not particularly rough but the rolling motion of the waves affected a lot of our new pilots. I recall that we joined some other ships there in San Diego and set out again for Espiritu Santo to rendezvous with the fleet.

I understand your ship was then involved in the bombardment of Tarawa.

Yes. We took part in that operation, and then, in succession, supporting landings at Apemama, Kwajalein, Eniwetok, Aitape, Hollandia, Saipan, Tinian, Guam, and Morotai.

Could you tell me what led up to the events you described in your written reminiscence concerning the kamikaze attack on your ship?

Our planes were involved in the Kwajalein operation, and then Eniwetok. We also helped support the operations at Saipan and Guam. One interesting thing about Saipan that I recall. We had a very narrow squeak there one night. Our radar had picked up a bogey some miles out. Of course you could hear all this taking place on our PA system. "He's 15 miles out, 10 miles," and so on. As the plane approached, our spotters actually spotted him and saw him release a torpedo which came straight for us. I was at my battle station in the forward battle dressing station which was at the waterline and I heard this torpedo strike the side of the ship and then glance off. You could hear it bouncing off throughout the length of the ship--glunk, glunk, glunk, glunk. It never exploded. The explanation was that the pilot released the torpedo so close to us that it didn't have time to arm before it struck. This might sound like a tall tale but I remember when we got back into dry dock, I saw the scars along the starboard side of the ship where the torpedo had scraped from front to back.

The ship's history says that you were involved in the latter part of June '44 in the Battle of the Philippine Sea. In August you left the Marianas, went to Eniwetok, and went back to Seadler Harbor to prepare for the invasion of the Philippines. It was October 1944 and you were providing air support for the landings on Leyte.

We left Manus Island where there was a tremendous invasion fleet in the Harbor. I recall an incident that happened there. There was a call for assistance from one of the other ships. A fire had broken

out and we had received a message to send some help. Being the junior medical officer, I was supposed to go with the fire and rescue crew. We got into a motor whaleboat and started out for the ship that had called for help. Our motor gave out and we spent the night bobbing around in the harbor and never did reach our objective. That was one of the worst nights of seasickness I ever had because we just drifted. We'd drift up against some merchant ship and ask for assistance but they'd completely ignore us. Finally, we managed to get a message back to our ship and they sent another whaleboat to pick us up. It was dawn by that time.

The Japanese launched their counterattack on October 24th and 25th.

We left Seadler harbor about 2 weeks before and I remember that we encountered a storm with poor visibility and gale force winds up to 50 knots which delayed things a bit for us but within a day or two we were able to proceed. We supported the landings at Leyte. As I remember, our fleet was divided into three groups--Taffy 1, 2, and 3 off the east coast of the Philippines. Our group, Taffy 1, was the southernmost and was to support the landings on Leyte. The Army seemed to have no great trouble with the initial landings on October 20 because the Japanese really expected us to land on Mindanao as I remember, and we were able to successfully repulse Japanese aerial attacks on our group. But of course, the Japanese navy activated itself and came down to try to knock us out of our positions. If you were listening to the radio, you were aware that something big was getting ready to happen. By October 18th, we received reports from our search planes that the Southern Japanese Fleet had put out from Singapore and was heading for the Philippines, and by October 22nd, our submarines had spotted the Japanese Center Force heading for San Bernardino Strait. By October 23rd we knew that Vice Admiral Nishimura Shoji's Southern Japanese Fleet was coming through the Surigao Strait which would put them in contact with us. Luckily for us, they were trapped in the strait and wiped out by our torpedo boats, other units of our fleet, and our pilots. At the same time, Admiral Kurita's came in through the San Bernardino Straits to the north expecting to catch us in a pincer maneuver. Even those of us doing mundane jobs were aware that something was going on from all the radio activity and reports.

On October 25 we had gone to general quarters at dawn and then had been released from general quarters. I had had breakfast and had gone back to my stateroom to take a shower. I don't recall whether I was actually in the shower or was dressing afterwards, but our captain announced on the PA system that the whole Japanese fleet

was attacking Taffy 3 to the north of us. I looked out on the fo'c'sle and sure enough it looked like there were a hundred ships on the horizon but in retrospect, I don't know if they were their's or our's. At that point our general quarters sounded and I had to go below to my battle dressing station in the forward part of the ship. I think it was one deck below the main deck--two or three below the flight deck. We were just about at the waterline. There was nothing unique about the battle dressing station. It was really only an ordinary containing 25-30 bunks and medical supplies that we stored in lockers there. It was just below and just aft of the catapult engine room. There was an open deck one deck above so that you could look out on either side. This was ordinarily used as a barbershop and had a couple of barber chairs there. A lot of times during general quarters I would sit in one of those barber chairs because it was the most comfortable thing I could find. When cruising in a combat area, you sleep in your clothes and that gets tiresome in a few weeks.

So this was the 25th when you saw this big fleet out there.

Yes. And shortly after that we were hit by this kamikaze that dove down into our flight deck.

That might have been the first kamikaze attack of the war.

I think it might have been. Our sister ship, the *Santee*, was hit first, but 19 minutes later another kamikaze managed to get through all the antiaircraft fire and crash into our flight deck about midships and penetrate to the main deck. In fact, when we finally got back to the states, we were instructed not to mention this to anyone. The Navy felt it was a new sort of weapon, and for security reasons no one should know about it. This attack did not do as much damage as the second attack.

That second attack, which happened on the following day, is the one you wrote about.

Yes.

What do you remember about that morning?

We had maybe 20 wounded in the forward battle dressing station from the action of the day before. And we had things pretty much under control by the 26th. In fact, at that point we were not even at general quarters. My stateroom was only two decks above our battle dressing station and I told my corpsman that I was going up there to get a change of clothes and maybe lie down a minute, and that if he needed me to come and get me. For some reason, exhaustion just got the better of me before I even got up there and I crawled

into a bunk in an adjoining sleeping compartment just forward of our battle dressing station and fell asleep.

I was asleep when the second attack occurred. The thing that woke me up was the sound of our anti-aircraft guns going off. As I said, we were not at general quarters. But when I heard the guns, I jumped up and started aft for the compartment which was our dressing station. Just as I got to the doorway there was a terrific explosion and we lost our lights. I went into our dressing station and was helping our corpsmen pull some of the wounded out from under wreckage when there was a second explosion. Some people thought it was a bomb. Some thought it was an explosion from the compression chamber of the catapult. But some terrific explosion took place at that point. It took place from 1 to 3 minutes--it is difficult to tell--after the first explosion. And that was the one that shattered all the bulkheads and broke water mains.

On that first explosion, my corpsman had lit out for my stateroom to get me, thinking that's where I was. But when he got up there he found that my stateroom had been demolished.

So he thought you were gone.

Yes. I will never forget how after we got working again, he looked up and saw me and said, "My God, you can't be here." Indeed, he thought I was dead and gone. "I'm so glad I'm not here by myself," he said.

[The following section is a recent letter written by Dr. Burwell to a friend describing his immediate experiences after the kamikaze strike.]

William Y'Blood's description of our evacuation of the forward battle dressing station on page 233 of *The Little Giants - U.S. Escort Carriers Against Japan* is not, however, entirely accurate. The newspaper account of ADM Kinkaid's citation, a copy of which is attached, more correctly states that it was wreckage, buckled bulkheads, lack of light and flooding from ruptured water mains that forced our evacuation, rather than explosions and fires as described in the book. Indeed, it's true that smoke and fire fed by aviation gasoline pouring onto the deck above us and wreckage and destruction of our passageway and ladder to the deck above by bomb and ammunition explosions prevented entrance to or exit from our dressing station, but up to that point we could have remained where we were, at least temporarily. Yet, a few minutes after being struck by the second kamikaze bomber, another tremendous explosion from an uncertain cause further wrecked our compartment, buckled our bulkheads and ruptured water mains above and in our compartment, so that we began

to flood. As the water level rose to knee height on our compartment, the ship was listing uncomfortably and lying dead in the water without steerage because of destruction of the bridge and wheelhouse. Isolated from the rest of the ship with only the reflection from the gasoline fires above and a few flickering battle lamps for light, my wounded partially covered with wreckage and already awash, it was clear that we could not function where we were, and I knew that we had to try to evacuate.

Now, after many years of putting this out of mind, exact memory is, perhaps thankfully, blurred, but I think there were about 30 of us, including two corpsmen, two stretcher bearers and perhaps 25 wounded resulting from the action of the day before, mostly consisting of extensive burns, blast and fragmentation injuries, traumatic amputations, compound fractures and multiple severe lacerations. About half of the wounded were able to help themselves to some extent in dragging themselves about, but the remainder were more or less helpless and required stretchers to be moved.

Though I did not know the extent of damage to the compartments aft of us, I knew that they were unoccupied and sealed off during battle conditions, so, I informed my corpsmen that I would have to try to find an escape by this route as it seemed to offer our only hope of evacuation. We opened the hatch to the adjacent compartment, and I was able to get through it and lock it behind me without flooding from our compartment. Feeling my way with the help of a pocket flashlight, I found the compartment to be intact and dry, though without light or ventilation. Then I worked my way aft through several adjacent unoccupied compartments consecutively in the same way, opening the interconnecting hatch to pass through and locking it after me, exploring and advancing to another until at last I reached an open space on the main deck. Now, feeling certain that we could make our way out by this route, I returned to rejoin my group in the forward battle dressing station. There, with my corpsmen and stretcher bearers and with the valiant help of some of the mobile wounded, we were able to move our stretcher bound wounded through the hatches from one compartment to the next without leaving or losing a single member of our party to finally emerge on the open deck. From there, we entered the Chief Petty Officers' Mess, to find 2 corpsmen tending to about 20 more wounded; so, we joined forces to organize a midship's dressing station and began to gather additional wounded in that area.

On the deck above, we found about 15 or 20 wounded, mostly burns and blast injuries, who had made their way into bunks in the Chief Petty Officers Quarters. There was no immediate possibility of moving them to our already overflowing and understaffed midship's

station; so, one of my corpsman and I gathered up what medical supplies we could carry and made our way up to the Chiefs' Quarters to do what we could for the wounded there. Just as we arrived at the entrance to the compartment, a sailor, apparently in panic, came running along the passageway screaming, "Everybody's going over the side! The Captain's dead! Everyone on the bridge has been killed! Everybody's abandoning ship! " Now, havoc! Now, contagious panic and cold fear! The wounded who had crawled into the compartment began struggling to get out, screaming hysterically, "Where's my life jacket? Who took my life jacket? Turn that loose! G'mme that! No, it's mine!" Some were shoving toward the entrance, fighting and scrambling over one another. My heart sank as I stepped into the threshold to block the entrance and shout over and over, "Get back into your bunks! There's no order to abandon ship! You don't need your life jackets!"

I could see this was only having limited effect; so, with much inward trepidation but outwardly extravagant bravado, I made myself step into the compartment from the threshold, remove my own life jacket and helmet and hang them in clear view on a coat hook near the entrance. Then, I had to consciously force myself to move away from the entrance and the comfort and security of my life jacket and go into the compartment to tend the wounded, fearing that at any moment some panicky sailor might snatch my life jacket and belt, setting off a wild melee. It seemed to me that time hung in the balance for an eternity, but finally one after another of the men quieted down and crawled back into their bunks, so that gradually things began at last to calm down and sort themselves out.

In the meantime, one of our corpsmen tending the wounded on the flight deck saw the plight of those isolated by fire on the forecastle and he came below to find me and report that medical help was critically needed there. It seemed to me that we would have to try to get through to them; so, he and I restocked our first aid bags with morphine syrettes, tourniquet, sulfa, vaseline and bandages, commandeered a fire extinguisher and set out making out way forward, dodging flames along the main deck. Along part of the way, we were joined by a sailor manning a sea water fire hose with fairly good pressure, and though the sea water would only scatter the gasoline fires away from us, by using the water and foam alternatively as we advanced, we managed to work our way up several decks, through passageways along the wrecked and burning combat information center and decoding area, the through officers' country and finally out on the forecastle. Many of the crew on the forecastle and the catwalks above it had been blown over the side by the explosions, but others trapped below and aft of the forecastle area found themselves under

a curtain of fire from aviation gasoline pouring down on them from burning planes on the flight deck above. Their only escape was to leap aflame into the sea, but some were trapped so that they were incinerated before they could leap. By the time we arrived on the forecastle, the flow of gasoline had mostly consumed itself, and flames were only erupting and flickering from combustible areas of water and oil. Nonetheless, the decks and bulkheads were still blistering hot and ammunition in the small arms locker on the deck below was popping from the heat like strings of firecrackers. With each salvo of popping, two or three more panicky crewmen would leap over the side, and we found that our most urgent task was to persuade those poised on the rail not to jump by a combination of physical restraint and reassurance that fires were being controlled and that more help was on the way. Most of the remaining wounded in the forecastle area were severely burned beyond recognition and hope, so that all that could be done for the obviously dying was to give the most rudimentary first aid consisting of morphine, a few swallow of water and some words of companionship, leaving them where we found them and moving on to another.

Nonetheless, within an hour or so after being struck in the last attack, power and steerage had been restored, fires were out, ammunition and gasoline explosions had ceased, pumps were working and ruptured water mains had been shut off, but it is miraculous that we escaped destruction during this period, because we were vulnerable not only to further air attack but we were a prime target for Japanese submarines firing torpedoes into our task force. At any rate, by this time we had done what we could for the wounded on the forecastle, and I moved back to the midship's dressing station, from which my corpsmen and stretcher bearers were searching out and gathering wounded as we could find them and move them. By nightfall, we began to run short of medical supplies, and I realized that we needed to salvage the supplies left behind in the forward battle dressing station. I was able to recruit a small group of stretcher bearers to help me, and we successfully made our way back to our former dressing station along the same route by which we had evacuated. We found that the compartment was still flooded with knee deep water, but most of our supplies were salvageable in wreckage above this level, so that we were able to load up our stretchers with plasma, dressings, sulfa, vaseline, and morphine and haul them out. After two or three trips we had all our supplies safely out and distributed elsewhere.

For the ensuing 3 days, however, we still had our hands full with continuing to search for, find, and care for our many wounded scattered in various areas of the ship and with collecting and burying

the dead at sea, until at last we were finally detached from our task group and allowed to proceed to Kossol Roads, Palau where we were met by two hospital ships; *Mercy* and *Bountiful*, to which we transferred our most urgent wounded on October 29 and 30. From there we went to Seadler Harbor, Manus Islands, to further "lick our wounds" for 5 days by sorting and caring for our remaining less urgently wounded and by making temporary repairs, so that we would be seaworthy enough to proceed to Oahu, Hawaiian Islands. Then, accompanied by a destroyer escort, we put out to sea again and finally arrived at Pearl Harbor on November 19. As we limped up the channel to the naval base, every Navy ship at anchor or in dock there "manned the rail" in a salute to the *Suwannee*, and our radio received this message: "Welcome to Pearl! Your successful fight against great odds will live as one of the most striking tales of Naval History. The people of our country and those of us in the Naval Service are gratified and proud of your outstanding performance of duty against the best the enemy could offer. As long as our country has men with your heart, courage, skill, and strength she need not fear for her future. To each and every one, a 'Well Done' - s/ ADM Nimitz."

We stayed in Pearl Harbor only overnight, just long enough to transfer our remaining wounded to the Naval Hospital and to take on supplies, and then we set out to sea again, headed for major repairs at the Puget Sound Navy Yard in Bremerton, Washington, where we docked on November 26, 1944. Detailed damage reports and photographs had been flown ahead of us to the Navy Yard and construction of replacements parts was already being fabricated even well before we arrived. When the repair work was completed within a month, a record breaking precedent in the fast and efficient repair of severely battle damaged ships was established and *Suwannee* was ready to fight once more.

[Question from Oral Interview]

Did you stay aboard while the ship was being repaired?

Since I was junior medical officer, I had to stay aboard for a week or so while it was being repaired and when the first section came back from leave I was able to go on leave. While I was on leave orders came through for me to report to the Naval Dispensary, U.S. Training Center, Gulfport, Mississippi. Before I could go to my new assignment I had to fly all the way back to Bremerton to be released and to pick up what was left of my clothing. That's a strange thing. My stateroom was demolished and I had nothing to wear. In fact, I had to wear dungarees for about a week because I had no clothing. But then after I got up there and started salvaging what I found in the stateroom, I found a lot of my clothes that had just been soaked.

By the time I sent them to the laundry, I was able to wear some of them.

I must have led a charmed life. After all this was over, I went back and looked in the bunk where I had been lying at the time of the first explosion and that bunk had been destroyed by the second explosion. It was absolutely unbelievable.

[Continuation of letter]

I departed with great pride in my ships and shipmates and their accomplishments, for I had witnessed innumerable instances of cool courage, bold bravery, and unselfish heroism blended with faith, friendship and self-sacrifice, but I will say that I had gained no fondness for naval warfare, and I was thankful to go on to other endeavors.

And now, Norman, I'd like you to know that you are due a debt of gratitude for encouraging me to write down my recollection of this anabasis, for I did not want to do it and I resisted as long as my conscience would let me. Without your interest, I would have been quite content to let well enough alone. Nevertheless, this exercise has forced me to recall and think through these events, exposing painful memories repressed in my subconscious, and I am hopeful that doing so will eventually exorcise the jumbled and out-of-joint emotions that have haunted me.

Postscript

Much of what I remember is jumbled together as if in a dream. For many years, I could not trust myself to vocalize any of this; even with those closest to me, because I would become too emotional. So the memories are repressed and after a while you do forget, and then later when you try to remember some incident, you cannot trust what you remember. That's one of the things that has made this account so difficult. You write about something as you recall it, but when you try to analyze and tie in related details, you realize that it is not exactly as you thought at first, or it's out of proper context or sequence, or it's been glossed to fit your memory or made more acceptable in some fashion.

It is very strange how one can sometimes experience feelings before an event. For several days before we were attacked on October 25, I had felt uneasy with an uncertain apprehension. In a way, this may not seem strange, because after all, we had been receiving reports that the Japanese were converging on us in force, and common sense would tell you that things were coming to a head. But it was more than that! There seems to be a sixth sense whereby we sometimes know that some accident or tragedy is in the making, but we are powerless

to stop it. I had never felt exactly this way before, even though we had participated in at least 8 battles; I had never felt that the Suwannee itself would come to any significant harm. But the uneasiness gradually built within me that our good fortune could not last forever -- fate could be tempted only so many times before sooner or later the odds would fall against you.

Thus, soon after we left Seadler Harbor bound for the Philippine Invasion, I began to have nightmares that would always end with abandoning ship and struggling to provide for our wounded. And so, when we were hit during the attack of October 25, it almost seemed to me as if it were the fulfillment of a prophecy. The unsettling thing to me for the next 24 hours was that the feeling of unease persisted, as if we were waiting for the "other shoe to drop", and I seemed to know that something more was in store for us. But the really odd thing is that after we were hit on the next day, October 26, and I had time to realize that I was unharmed, I experienced an inexplicable sense of great relief as if all danger were past and as if I were now guaranteed survival and safety. I don't know how to explain it; it was not based on any reasoning; and it certainly was not due to any form of courage, true or false. It was only something I "felt in my bones"; some might call it extra-sensory perception.

Yet, one of the worst things was the guilt reaction. Afterwards, you begin to question why you were spared and another was not, then you begin to question whether anything you could have done would have changed an outcome, and next you begin to question your motives for every action. You come to feel guilty for trying to save your own skin, and paradoxically the guilt is made worse if you are cited for an award of some kind. Finally, you can only come to terms with yourself by realizing that it's all pure chance --the fall of the dice--the luck of the draw-- some win--some lose!

The reunions have helped. To be able to reminisce with shipmates who have had similar experiences and feelings has made it possible to reconstruct events with less distortion, and you find that you have become able to talk about your memories and even write about them, at this account attests. Now, I rarely have a startle reaction to a loud noise or thunder-clap at night that sends me scrambling out of bed or to the floor. And not for several years now have I had the old recurrent nightmare that had plagued me for a long time -- a nightmare that was always the same. It would begin with a flash, a reverberating jolt and blast, smoke, darkness, a crazy list to the deck, splashing water, the odor of wet charcoal and burned flesh (remarkably like burning chicken feathers), groping in darkness, moans, then a shudder, water gushing from somewhere. Then

-- "Abandon Ship! Abandon Ship!" "All hands abandon ship!" What to do with our wounded? A few paltry life rafts, and two motor whale boats. Sometimes in the dream the rafts would be destroyed before getting them in the water -- at other times we'd be struggling to load them. Then, awaken in a cold sweat! It's very odd that the nightmare always ended in abandoning ship, because that's the one event that didn't take place for me in reality. I suppose that it was the dread of it that inserted that outcome in my nightmare and kept it recurring for so long.