

Flag saved after WWII attack binds veterans

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Ed Anderson was on board the tanker USS Neches, which witnessed first hand a Japanese kamikaze plane slamming into LST 884 off the coast of Okinawa during WWII. A Beaumont sailor on board the LST saved the American flag when ordered to abandon ship. He later gave the flag to Coast Guard Station Sabine. Anderson flew in Tuesday from Seattle to visit friends and see the flag he last saw in 1945. While there, he described the kamikaze's approach to the LST in detail. Dave Ryan/The Enterprise Photo: Beaumont

A blast of horns early in the morning of April 1, 1945, bounced American sailors out of their bunks and into their battle stations off the island of Okinawa.

Japanese planes were banking down on the sitting gray ducks that were preparing to launch the last great invasion of World War II.

Edwin G. Anderson, an 18-year-old from Iowa, was aboard an oil tanker named the USS Neches.

The Japanese weren't letting bombs fly. These were kamikaze, suicide planes intent on crashing themselves into the U.S. ships.

One of them hit a vessel perhaps 100 yards away from the USS Neches.

Aboard that ship was a Beaumont sailor named Glenn Cudd, who saved the flag from the wrecked ship.

Cudd donated that flag to the U.S. Coast Guard's Station Sabine toward the end of his life, and it was that flag that Anderson, now of Seattle, had come to Sabine Pass to see.

Anderson said the entire world that day seemed as if it were on fire.

"We heard GQ (general quarters, also known as battle stations). We could hear the other ships firing. I got up there in a hurry. I can visualize it. I can hear it," Anderson said. "We were no more than 100 yards away" from Cudd's ship.

He thought the ship, a landing ship that carried troops and tanks, was a total loss - no survivors. But most of its crew did survive, Cudd and his flag among them.

The kamikazes weren't through with American ships. A few days into the fight for Okinawa, more planes came swarming down on them.

Anderson said he was at his 5-inch gun, the biggest on the ship, with the others in his gun crew. He saw a little speck in the sky and it grew larger, heading straight for the Neches and its cargo of 6 million gallons of aviation gasoline and diesel fuel.

"We switched (the gun) to manual (firing) so we could control where the shells went (as opposed to automatic firing). I always felt there was a guiding hand for the man who set the fuses," he said. "You could feel God's presence."

The first shell exploded to the left and above the attacking plane. The pilot veered toward another target - another landing ship full of troops.

Anderson was the sight setter on the gun. He cranked the wheels on the 5-inch gun to give the shell a little more lead and a little less elevation. Another miss.

A third shot hit its nose. In Navy talk, they splashed a kamikaze.

The Neches became the first tanker to bring down an enemy plane, he said.

"We weren't very good," he said. "We weren't a warship. We almost shot down a tow plane in target practice."

Anderson described the events during his visit Tuesday. He had come to Southeast Texas at the invitation of friends he had made at reunions of the USS Neches, including Margie Hanlon and her late husband, John, who had served aboard the Neches, she said. She and her husband had come to know Anderson when he began reunions for shipmates 15 years ago.

When she saw an Enterprise article June 14 - Flag Day - about the flag Cudd had donated to the Coast Guard station, she recalled Anderson's description of the attack in his memoir, "Looking Back."

So she called Anderson and invited him to Southeast Texas to have a look at it.

The 48-star American flag is ripped and frayed along its stripes at the bottom. Its colors are darkened by time like oiled wood. It is mounted in a case displayed in a stairwell in the station's main hall.

When hurricanes threaten, and the station is evacuated, the flag evacuates as well.

Anderson, 84, had left home in Iowa in 1943, went to Portland, Ore., and got a shipyard job building tankers. He enlisted in the Navy as soon as he turned 18, April 10, 1944.

He recalls the day he was ferried out with a group of 11 sailors to the ship's company he would join.

"No, not a tanker," he thought. "I built those!"

The USS Neches earned nine battle stars for its role in combat from Guadalcanal in 1942 through Okinawa in 1945. Its service includes the battle of Iwo Jima in February 1945 and Anderson was aboard for that.

"We were the lone tanker for the Iwo invasion," he said. "It was an amazing display of firepower. It could not be made into a movie."