

LA GRANGE FIGHTS BACK!

THIS VICTORY SHIP TOOK THE LAST KNOWN KAMIKAZE HIT OF WORLD WAR TWO

BY ROBBIE STEWART

Japan was doomed. The date was 13 August 1945 and the world's largest gathering of warships was pointed directly at the enemy's Home Islands. Supporting that magnificent fleet of warriors were hundreds of lesser-known vessels providing troops, supplies, maintenance, and the myriad of other tasks needed to keep the US Navy moving. Among those ships was USS *La Grange* (APA-124).

La Grange was a VC2-S-AP5 Victory ship named for a county in Indiana. Laid down under a Maritime Commission contract on 26 June 1944 by the California Shipbuilding Corporation in Wilmington, California, construction moved forward with astonishing speed and

she was launched on 1 September 1944 and commissioned on 11 November of that year.

After shakedown and amphibious training operations, *La Grange* departed San Diego on 1 January 1945 and her destination was the western Pacific. The Victory ship arrived at Manus on 18 January and she immediately went to work carrying troops and cargo to Hollandia and on to the Philippines before joining Transport Squadron 17.

After a month of intensive preparations, the attack transport departed Dulag Harbor in the Philippines as part of the western islands attack

group in the greatest amphibious assault of the Pacific War — the invasion of Okinawa.

The ship arrived in the transport area off Kerama Retto on 26 March and successfully landed advance forces that took the small cluster of islands, which would serve as an advance naval base for fueling, repairs, and replenishment during the conquest of Okinawa.

La Grange was armed



Captain Frank R. Walker was at the helm of the *La Grange* when it became the last Navy ship to be attacked by kamikazes during WWII. There is some confusion as to the exact spelling of the ship's name. Navy records are usually all uppercase — LAGRANGE — while other sources list it as Lagrange. The current official spelling of the Indiana county name is LaGrange. The builder's plate states SS LA GRANGE while some construction records have it as La Grange, so that form is used in this article.



A Zero fitted with a large bomb made a potent suicide weapon.

with one 5-inch/38-cal gun, five twin 40mm guns, and ten single 20mm weapons and these guns would serve her well.

On 2 April, upon retiring from Kerama Retto, the convoy in which *La Grange* was traveling came under attack by a force of kamikaze aircraft. Private First Class Max Drucker of the 306th Infantry (embarked aboard the transport) was given credit for saving the ship from damage. Drucker was on

deck near a 20mm anti-aircraft gun when eight kamikazes caught the Americans by surprise. One of the Japanese planes entered a steep dive aimed at *La Grange*. Drucker got to the controls of the 20mm gun and directed an accurate stream of fire at the suicide aircraft. Oddly, his weapon was the only one engaging the enemy. The aircraft took numerous hits and veered off from the dive and plunged into the sea about 200 yards from the ship (as far as we can tell, PFC Drucker was not awarded any sort of medal for his heroic action). *La Grange* remained off Okinawa for the next 30 days supporting operations on shore from Buckner Bay.

On the evening of 13 August, the crews of surrounding ships fired off weapons and flares to celebrate the fact that



USS *La Grange* was not a well-photographed ship. The transport is seen at rest and clearly shows the rigors of having participated in seven invasions. Part of the Haskell-class, the attack transports were designed to carry 1500 troops and their equipment and land them on hostile beaches using the ship's integral landing craft. Haskell-class ships were among the first Allied ships to enter Tokyo Bay at the end of the war and they landed the first occupation troops at Yokosuka. With the end of the war, most participated in Operation Magic Carpet. A few were reactivated for the Korean War and some stayed in service into the Vietnam War.