

THE ORMOC BAY GUNFIGHT

IN A PLAN THE AMERICANS THOUGHT WOULD PUT THREE DESTROYERS INTO ORMOC BAY WHERE THEY COULD SHELL ENEMY TRANSPORTS AT WILL, THEY SUDDENLY FOUND THEMSELVES IN A RAGING BATTLE WITH WHAT SEEMED TO BE THE ENTIRE JAPANESE NAVY! - **BY GENE ANDERSON**

General Douglas MacArthur's Intelligence Staff had reported to the Commander of the Seventh Fleet that the Japanese were desperately attempting to reinforce their beleaguered troops on Leyte through Ormoc Bay by sending in several lightly-armed troop ships convoyed by a lone destroyer escort. Orders were then sent to Adm. James L. Kauffman, Commander Philippine Sea Frontier, to sink that convoy on the night on 2/3 December 1944. He selected my ship, the *USS Allen M. Sumner* (DD-692) and two of her sister class, the *Moale* (DD-693) and the *Cooper* (DD-695), to do the job. He felt that these ships would be just right to sink this reinforcement as these ships could bring to bear a total of twelve 5-inch/38 caliber guns from their forward battleship-type turrets while only showing their thin bows to the enemy.

These destroyers were new in the fleet and were considered the world's

most heavily armed ships of their kind. These 2200-tonners carried in their 369-foot length three sets of twin 5-inch guns, two sets of twin and two sets of quad 40mm cannon, eleven 20mm cannon, two sets of five-tubes each of 21-inch torpedoes, depth charges, and the very latest in radar and radar fire control. The last was to prove invaluable on this raid.

At the time they were assigned to the mission, the ships were untried for this type of an operation — having served only on training duty and as escorts with the Third Fleet Fast Carrier Task Force. The operation would be new to most of the



Button given to those attending *Cooper's* launching. The destroyer would live less than nine months.

USS Cooper at speed on 24 April 1944. Her port side shows Measure 32 Design 3D camouflage to advantage. Darkest color is Dull Black, the medium color is Ocean Gray S-O (which also carried onto areas of the otherwise Deck Blue 20-B), and the lightest color is Light Gray S-L. Note the modified bridge and identification number 695 on the crown of Mt. 52.

crews as many were fresh out of boot camp and Midshipmen School. I recall we approached it with great apprehension, particularly after witnessing the start of the *kamikaze* attacks, which had just begun in the Philippines.

Shortly before sundown, we got underway from Leyte Gulf to go on this "surprise" mission. It had rained heavily that day, and poor weather had kept our promised air cover grounded at Tacloban airstrip. At our

departure the weather turned to gray, misty overcast. About an hour out, a single enemy plane ducked under the overcast and was immediately shot down in flames leaving a smoking marker in the famous Surigao Straits where a Japanese fleet lay sunk after a recent sea battle. It was believed that this plane may have radioed our position before being hit; however, in spite of this and the many reported enemy aircraft in the area, we continued our night mission without air cover.

I was in a good position to witness the coming event as my battle station was out on deck as a director operator of a Mk. 14 director that aimed

and fired the starboard quad 40mm mount which was located just aft of Number Two stack. I was very fortunate to have an excellent gun crew to operate and load this weapon.

As we proceeded towards Ormoc Bay, the overcast had changed to a light milky haze which diffused the light from a full moon. Traveling at 30 knots, our huge wakes had activated the phosphorus in the water, which in turn had brilliantly illuminated us from the air and from the surface. Being so, it was hard to believe that this raid was going to be any sort of a surprise. This became apparent about an hour before midnight when our Air Search radar picked up an unidentified aircraft astern which had apparently followed our brilliant wake.

Upon hearing the vector, I brought my gun to bear in that direction. A minute or so later, I spotted a dark shadow in the light haze and began to track it. When I recognized it as