

Into the Winds of Hell

Craving action after months of boring escort duty, the crew of the destroyer USS Paul Hamilton received a rude awakening as the harsh realities of battle were realized in their baptism of fire

BY WILLIAM
MCCREVAN

American Army forces under Gen. Douglas MacArthur were still engaged in a struggle to wrest control of the island of Leyte from the Japanese when the destroyer USS *Paul Hamilton* (DD-590), under the guidance of the new commanding officer, Cmdr. Dan Carlson, USN, entered Leyte Gulf after having been detached from the rampaging US Pacific Third Fleet under the command of Adm. Bull Halsey. The role of the *Paul Hamilton* would be changed dramatically now that it had become a component of the Seventh Fleet, commonly — and not too proudly — referred to by Naval personnel as being “MacArthur’s Navy.” Many of the crew on

board were a bit dismayed with this change, having too often relied upon the skillful deployment of the US Pacific Fleet under the capable command of Admirals Halsey and Spruance. And to some, our fate now lay in the unknown quality of leadership that would be demonstrated by our new skipper who had just left a billet on board a battleship. Many of the crew had enough of a “battleship spit and polish” routine imposed upon them by the previous skipper and felt that such inordinate practice for a destroyer would continue.

Still, many on board were delighted with the change and were eager to engage in the close support of landing operations, not having such opportunity while serving as protective coverage for the Third and Fifth Fleet replenishment forces. Too often, our ship was far

from enemy shores while our planes from the task forces were raising havoc with the enemy. But when this new skipper took over command, he related to the crew the following message: “This crew has been yearning for some action and now you can be sure that you’re going to get a belly full of it.” That prophecy was soon to be realized.

On 7 December 1944, exactly three years after the infamous Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the *Paul Hamilton*, leading a convoy of amphibious assault forces, entered San Pedro Harbor of the island of Leyte in the Philippine Islands after having averted a *kamikaze* attack while cruising close to the island of Mindanao. The *Paul Hamilton*, along with some other destroyers and cruisers, was then assigned to patrol the waters of Leyte Gulf in support of the Army ashore. But when the Navy’s commitment to support the Army forces was nearing an end, it was

In the late afternoon of 12 December

1944, most of the destroyers and cruisers began steaming out of San Pedro Harbor onto Leyte Gulf to join a large formation of amphibious craft consisting of 50 fully loaded LSTs, 30 LSMs, and 30 LCIs arriving from advance bases. It was apparent that a large scale assault was in the making. After the cruisers and the destroyers formulated a covering screen, the task group headed east during the twilight hours to shield their destination from the watchful eyes of the Japanese on Leyte and other nearby islands. But when the last diminishing ray of evening light faded from the seascape, the task group changed course and headed south toward the Surigao Straits. Condition 1, with full alert, was established while this group made its slow transit through the straits where elements of the Japanese Fleet had been destroyed in October and which served as a fruitful hunting ground for the marauding *kamikaze*.

Wide speculation concerning our destination ran rampant throughout the ship since only the

USS *Paul Hamilton* (DD-590) and USS *Twiggs* (DD-591) ready for launching at Charleston Navy Yard, South Carolina, on 7 April 1943. (NHHC)

