

THEY KNEW WHERE TO HIT

THE SINKING OF USS LITTLE OFF OF OKINAWA
BY GUY NASUTI



During May 1945, the USS *Little* (DD-803) was ordered to patrol the waters of Picket Station No. 10 off Okinawa. Operating with destroyer minelayer USS *Aaron Ward* (DM-34) and the smaller LSM(R)-195, LCS(L)-15, LCS(L)(3)-25, and LCS(L)(3)-83 (commonly referred to by the “tin can” destroyer sailors as “pall bearers”), she provided early detection of impending air attacks. This would help to prevent any attacks against the fleet’s much larger vessels, but it also increased the likelihood that *Little* and her companion vessels would themselves become targets. Although well prepared for this

possibility, her crew was nonetheless surprised by the unprecedented degree of coordination and tactical innovation exhibited by the Japanese kamikaze pilots on 3 May 1945.

A Fletcher-class destroyer, USS *Little* was the second ship of the Navy to be named for Capt. George Little. Built at the Seattle-Tacoma Shipbuilding Corporation, she was laid down on 13 September 1943, launched on 22 May 1944, and commissioned on 19 August of that year. A formidable weapon, *Little* could travel at 35 knots and carried five 5-inch guns, ten 40mm weapons, seven 20mm guns, ten 21-

inch torpedo tubes, six depth charge projectors, and two depth charge tracks.

After training off the West Coast, *Little* departed Seattle on 11 November 1944 to escort a convoy to Pearl Harbor. She arrived on 23 November and participated in gunnery training and battle problems. On 22 January 1945, she got underway with a group of LSTs for Eniwetok and rehearsals for the invasion of Iwo Jima. Final preparations were made at Saipan and on 15 February *Little* set off for the assault beaches.

Shore bombardment at Iwo



USS *Little* on 1 September 1944 near Puget Sound Navy Yard at Bremerton, Washington.

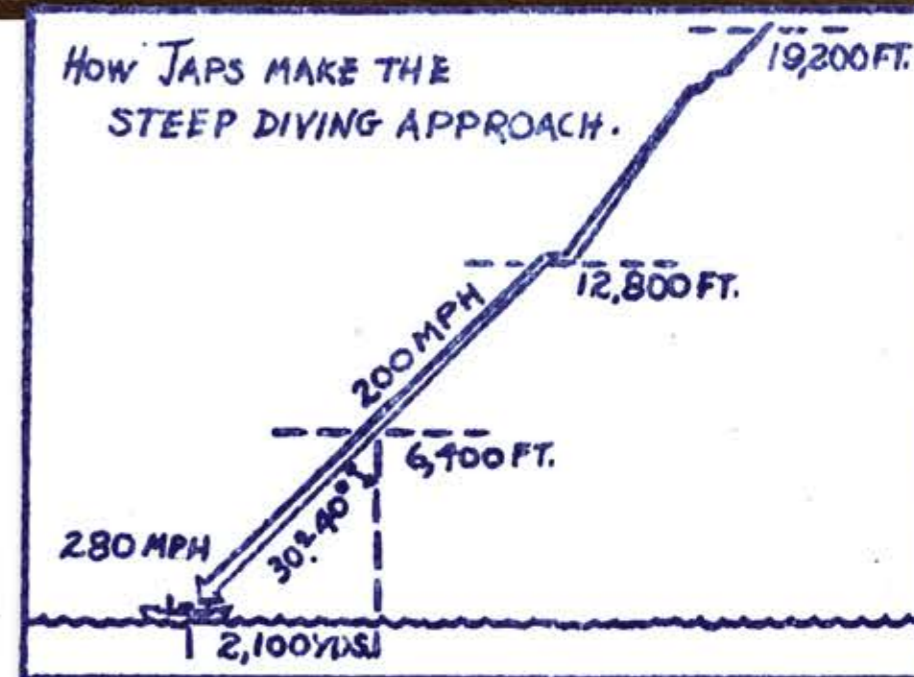
Jima began on 19 February. *Little* furnished fire support for ground forces until the 24th when she left for Saipan. She returned on 4 March for bombardment, screening, and radar picket duties and was back at Saipan on 14 March to prepare for the horror of the Okinawa invasion.

USS *Little* sailed for Okinawa on 27 March, assigned to the demonstration group charged with feigning landings opposite the actual assault beaches. After accomplishing this diversion on 1/2 April, *Little* screened transports and escorted LSTs to the beaches. On 19 April, the destroyer was ordered to picket duty where she remained until 24 April — unscathed despite relentless enemy suicide attacks.

That brings us to 3 May. On that day, a fanatical Japan in its death throes commenced Operation *Kikusui V*. This involved launching approximately 450 aircraft of many varieties against Allied ships. Throughout the following week, varying numbers of aircraft would be sent out against the massive fleet. The mass kamikaze attacks had begun shortly after the invasion of Okinawa and they sank at least a dozen ships, killing hundreds of sailors.

As *Little* steamed through calm seas to the west, Seaman First Class Allen W. Barnhart stood at this general quarter’s station at No. 4 gun mount reflecting on what sort of mentality drove the Japanese to launch kamikaze attacks, especially against the destroyers off Okinawa. He recalled thinking to himself, “The Japanese were so suicidal that they were just murdering us.”

At 1813 on 3 May, a force of



The Navy quickly learned that the Japanese were changing their suicide tactics to match the situation and this drawing of how a kamikaze would make a steep diving approach on an Allied ship at Okinawa was attached to a classified report.

between 18 and two dozen suicide attackers approached *Aaron Ward*’s group from the west. The friendly combat air patrol (CAP) of four Grumman F6F-5 Hellcats scrambled to find the enemy — but they failed, most likely losing the incoming aircraft in heavy cloud cover. However, at 1841, a kamikaze struck *Aaron Ward* and a second attacked *Little*. Her crew opened up with 20mm and 40mm fire, hitting the Aichi D3A Type 99 Val. Despite numerous hits, the Val continued on its path, smashing into the *Little* amidships near her No. 4 gun mount. A second kamikaze, also hit by *Little*’s anti-aircraft battery, plunged into the sea just moments later.

Two more kamikazes struck *Little* in quick succession, one amidships, in nearly the exact same spot as the first.

The ammunition in the gun mount’s storage room began exploding, causing fires to ignite. A third came down in a vertical dive and crashed into the torpedo mount and main deck, breaking the destroyer’s keel and opening the lower decks to the sea. With no power throughout the ship, *Little* became dead in the water. “It just blew us up... we were in deep trouble,” Barnhart remembered.

Seaman Charles E. DeMann watched in horror from his battle station at a 5-inch gun turret above the bridge. After the last kamikaze struck the ship, he recalled, “I was blown off the top of the director and came down onto the bridge... maybe a drop of 25 feet.” Somehow still attached to his sound-powered telephone, he heard commanding officer Madison

The Japanese wanted to hit the carriers and battleships but first they had to get through the picket ships. In this view, a kamikaze is blown apart as it heads towards the USS *Bennington* (CV-20), which was photographed from the USS *Hornet* (CV-12) off Okinawa. Note the picket putting up a terrific anti-aircraft barrage. Of the 149 Allied ships hit or sunk by kamikazes during the Battle of Okinawa, 88 were destroyers or destroyer types and another 30 were destroyer escorts.