

SACRIFICE OFF

Dramatic painting by Takeshima Satoshi showing a VC-10 FM-2 Wildcat getting airborne while the *Gambier Bay* is bracketed by enemy shells. (USS *Gambier Bay* Association)



SAMAR

THE ESCORT CARRIERS AND DESTROYERS OF TAFFY 3 WERE NO MATCH FOR THE BATTLESHIPS OF ADM. KURITA'S FLEET. YET, THE MEN OF THESE SHIPS — AND PARTICULARLY GAMBIER BAY — WOULD NOT STOP
BY J.B. RIVARD

In October 1944, ten months before Japan surrendered, Gen. Douglas MacArthur's troops invaded the Philippine island of Leyte. The Second Fleet of the Imperial Japanese Navy, commanded by V/Adm. Takeo Kurita, aimed to engage and destroy MacArthur's force. Kurita's powerful fleet featured the world's largest battleship, *Yamato*, whose nine 18.1-inch guns could fire

3200-pound armor-piercing shells more than 20 miles. Six US Navy escort carriers and screen steamed about 60 nautical miles (nmi) east of the Philippine island of Samar, directly in Kurita's path. Known for their call sign "Taffy 3," they comprised one-third of the US Navy Task Group 77.4. At dawn on 25 October, Kurita surprised Taffy 3 and began hurling

salvos into the carriers' midst. Taffy 3 was nearly defenseless: The hull of each escort carrier was of Merchant Marine thickness and its only armament capable of surface defense was a single 5-inch gun. Taffy 3's screen — three destroyers and four destroyer escorts — was simply no match for the battleships and cruisers of Kurita's fleet. What looked on this day to be

a sure defeat for Task Group 77.4 surprisingly turned into one of the most decisive naval battles of World War II. Commander Ernest E. Evans, who posthumously became Taffy 3's sole recipient of the Medal of Honor, at this moment spoke from the bridge of destroyer USS *Johnston* (DD-557):
"All hands to general quarters. Prepare to attack major portion of the Japanese fleet. All engines ahead flank... stand by for a torpedo attack." The crews of the USS *Hoel* (DD-

533), USS *Heermann* (DD-532), and those of the destroyer escorts *Dennis*, *John C. Butler*, *Raymond*, and *Samuel B. Roberts*, knew as well they were the first line of surface defense for Taffy 3. As is well-documented, they served valiantly



Squadron patch for VC-10 designed by Avenger pilot Ens. Robert B. "Tuffy" Barrows.