

For Memorial Day, US Navy veteran recounts heroic battle with kamikaze planes at Okinawa

TOM KNAPP | Staff Writer | May 29, 2017

The kamikaze pilot flew out of the sun, blinding the crewmen of the USS Colhoun as the plane plunged toward the ship and slammed into the hull, exploding inside the engine room and sealing the destroyer's fate.

Roy Reifsnyder, not yet 20 and manning one of the Colhoun's big guns during the bloody Battle of Okinawa, briefly fretted that he'd never see his parents again. Then he got back to work, firing as fast as he could.

Nineteen Japanese suicide planes attacked the beleaguered ship on April 6, 1945, Reifsnyder says.

"We shot 14 of them down," he says. "But five of them got through and hit us, some hard."

Another plane came at them from the port side, he recalls.

"As he approached I said, 'Guys, we're going to get hit,' and I ducked my head in. And that doggone wing of that guy's plane knocked my helmet off," Reifsnyder says.

"I should not be here, truthfully. Everything was stacked against me, but the good Lord, I guess, had plans for me."

Admonished by an admiral

Now 92 and living at Masonic Village in Elizabethtown, Reifsnyder often speaks to groups about his memories of the war.

He'd buried them for a while, he admits, but at a reunion for the last nine survivors of Colhoun's crew, a dozen or more years ago, Reifsnyder says they were admonished by a visiting admiral to make sure their heroic story wasn't forgotten.

Reifsnyder, who grew up in Berks County, joined the Navy in 1943.

"We graduated from high school on a Friday. I was in the Navy Monday morning, compliments of FDR," he says with a hearty laugh. "We were all drafted, and I had my choice (of military branches). I figured the Navy would give me three meals a day and a bunk to sleep in. It worked out pretty well."

After 10 weeks of boot camp, Reifsnyder spent another 10 learning to be a gunner's mate, then a few more in advanced training. He assembled with the Colhoun on Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay, was designated a gun captain and met the ship's captain while covered in grease and flat on his back under a 5-inch gun mount.

The Colhoun steamed into the Pacific theater, rescuing a few downed aviators and running an escort for a carrier fleet commanded by Adm. John McCain Sr.

"We got MacArthur back to the Philippines" in October 1944, Reifsnyder says with a snort. "MacArthur, the biggest glory hound there was."

Then it was north to Iwo Jima in February 1945, where the Navy supported the Marines assault on the heavily defended island.

"We witnessed the raising of the flag, and that was a thrill," he says. "The whole fleet sounded their whistles and bells. It was something to see."

During the naval bombardment of Japanese defenses, Reifsnyder says, "we burned out our guns" with the constant firing. They were so close to land, he says, that the enemy was able to hit the ship with mortar batteries.

"I got a piece of shrapnel out of it," he says. "It's still in my leg. I never reported it."

Bound for Okinawa

After repairs and a refit in Saipan, the Colhoun sailed for Okinawa.

Reifsnyder was assigned to help reclaim two crewmen who missed the ship's departure. When they were lifted aboard on a bosun's chair, Reifsnyder glanced down "and it was nothing but sharks. That was a little frightening."

Back on the Colhoun, they escorted landing craft to Okinawa, he says, "zigzagging through them to make sure there weren't any lurking subs," arriving on Easter Sunday, April 1, 1945.

On April 6 — still in the early stages of an 82-day battle — the Colhoun got a distress call from USS Bush.

“We steamed over to help them out, and there was a suicide plane sticking out of the side of their hull,” Reifsnyder says. “We knew what we were going to get into.”

A lucky storm

Colhoun’s guns made short work of most of the kamikaze planes that attacked the ship, Reifsnyder says, but a few made it through the hail of gunfire.

“The first one that hit us went right down into the engine room and blew up there,” he says. “We could hear him coming. He came right out of the sun. We could not see him, but we knew he was coming.”

Fortunately, he says, a heavy storm came up, turning the sky black and ending the attack.

“That storm saved most of our crew,” he says. “We had high hopes, that maybe we could make repairs. But the captain said we had to abandon ship. There was too much damage done.”

They put the wounded in the ship’s remaining lifeboats, but another ship came alongside and took the survivors off the Colhoun, “so we didn’t have to brave the sharks.”

A tugboat tried to tow Colhoun to Okinawa, but the heavily listing ship, flooding and burning, couldn’t be saved.

When Reifsnyder’s time was up, he re-enlisted and served as a gunner’s mate on a troop ship. He mustered out of the Navy three years after he joined.

A normal life

When Reifsnyder isn’t speaking about the war, he says, “I try to block it. I try to lead a normal life.”

After the war he got into the feed business, then ended up in restaurant work.

First managing a motel dining room in York County, Reifsnyder and his wife Jane — whom he met on a blind date before the war and married six months after the war, and who died in 2002 — ran the former Lemon Tree on Columbia Avenue for 26 years.

They had four children, 15 grandchildren and 11 great-grandchildren, he says.

He’s glad to tell stories about the war, he says, because it’s important for people to remember.

“There aren’t many of us left from World War II,” he says. “And we’re getting scarcer by the day.”