

How The Gambier Bay Went To Her Death; Teaneck Yeoman Tells Of Hell In Pacific

Cornered By Great Jap Force, Carrier Fought Till She Could Move No More; Then Foe Shelled Survivors

"After praying as hard as I could, I finally fell asleep, and I doubt if there was a man among us that night who was an atheist."

Frank Conklin Jr., Yeoman 2/c, was describing his reactions following the sinking of the escort carrier Gambier Bay in Leyte Gulf in October. The son of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Conklin of 1079 Julia Street, West Englewood, he is home on a 30-day furlough, after surviving the sinking of the carrier by a sizeable Jap task force.

A graduate of the Teaneck High School, class of 1943, he entered the Navy in May of that year and in January, 1944, was assigned to the new carrier and spent the next 10 months in the Pacific, participating in the invasions of Saipan, Tinian, Guam, Peleleu, Anguar, and Leyte.

"It was the morning of October 25, he related, "and we had just gone below after the morning General Quarters. I had gone down to my sack and was in it for a minute before going to chow when the General Quarters bell went off a mile a minute. Putting on the head phones, I tried to find out what was the matter, while all the time I had officers and men urging me to get the dope on what was happening.

FORCE APPROACHING

"In the meantime the lookout saw a squall and it started to rain. Just then a report came up to the bridge that there was a large surface force coming our way from astern about 20 miles away. It was not identified as ours and we all turned our eyes in that direction. Just astern of the last carrier, three pluming spurts of water shot up and we knew we were in for it. More hits started coming all around the other carrier and a plume of black smoke rose from their flight decks. The ship veered off our starboard quarter, in an attempt to outrun the Jap formation which consisted of four battleships, six cruisers and a number of destroyers.

"In the meantime our planes had taken off, loaded with torpedoes and bombs in an attempt to delay the attack. Shells started coming in our direction. One shell or rather a salvo hit on the port bow and a voice came blasting over the squawk box to notify us that water was coming in below and was already up to their knees. The pumps started working, but could not stem the flow of water into our forward engine room. Meanwhile hits were making us from all directions, at

the Jap formation had spread out. One destroyer off our starboard beam, after laying down a smoke screen, reversed his course and went back into his own smoke, letting go three torpedoes into one of the Jap cruisers, causing confusion on that ship.

"The Japs were using marker shells colored with pink, blue and yellow dye which gave them an idea where to put the next salvo. We were continually being knocked down by the concussion of the shells, and smoke started coming up from all portions of the ship. Our after engine room was knocked out which left us dead in the water. One Jap cruiser was coming in fast astern and another off our port quarter.

SHIP ABANDONED

"Finally the word was passed to abandon ship. I removed the phones when one of the officers told us to go over the side. It was quite a drop from the bridge as the ship was listing heavily to port, and after removing some of the foul-weather clothing, I took a look over the side and asked it down the line toward the water. Men coming down the lines and ladders were getting splattered by shrapnel and the wounded were having a hard time getting away from the ship.

"Some men still within the hull were trapped as bulkheads and decks were smashed together. The ship was now a picture of fire, smoke and holes and near misses were hitting all around the rafts. Finally from about 200 yards distance, we watched the proud Gambier Bay list heavily for a moment and then roll over bottom up, with one screw still showing. A few moments more and she dove, bow first, the one screw seeming to bid us farewell.

"On the rafts, it was quite another story. Shells still rained about us. The wounded were given preference in the rafts while others were pulled away from the spot where the ship had gone down, in case she should explode under the water. Men with gaping holes in their heads made no sound other than to call a shout of recognition to men on the other rafts.

"We would rather have died than be picked up by the Japs, so we kept quiet and low in the rafts to avoid detection. We had been in the water about 3 hours when it started to rain and rain hard. With what containers and helmets we had, we caught water and drank it, although it had a rust taste. Finally night fell with a mysterious silence and every one started thinking of home, although we had been doing that during the day too. I don't think it once entered our minds that there was no chance of our getting through, although we were all prepared for it, if that was the way it was to be.



Y. 2/C FRANK CONKLIN
SHARKS ATTACK

"At dusk of the second day, every one was awake and raring to go, but there wasn't any place in go. Nations of malt tablets were distributed and we thought that was about the best meal we had ever eaten. The water kegs had been smashed and there was no water. The next day the sun grew hot and we started to burn, and in the afternoon we were visited by sharks. One officer went out in the water to pick up some floating object and was attacked by a shark from behind. The shark took two huge pieces out of his back and he died a few moments later. Many men had already been buried at sea with a few words of prayer and a piece of metal tied to their legs for weight.

"One o'clock the next morning we sighted lights off in the distance. We shot a flare but could see no action. Finally as the lights came closer, we started shooting and yelling. A PC boat came alongside and threw us a line. An arm came down to help me and with one lift he had me aboard and I was out of Hell and into Heaven. My legs were like water, but the fellow let me go after I assured him I was all right, and then I fainted and went down into a neat little huddle. He gave me a blanket, a cigarette and a cup of hot Joe. I finally lay down in a pool of grease and went to sleep. Some time later a fellow put a blanket over me and the next thing I knew it was morning, a golden morning with fear almost gone and a clean white wake breaking a trail behind us."

9-23-44

HARRIS NAMED TO CAPTAINCY IN AIR FORCE

Williams, Ranieri, And Froude Also Get Promotions

NEWS OF SERVICES

Robert Gould Harris, son of Professor and Mrs. Gould Harris of 356 Winthrop Road, West Englewood, has been promoted to the rank of captain, according to an announcement made by the War Department at his station with the First Air Force, Seymour Johnson Field, North Carolina.

Today's War Department promotion bulletins also revealed the temporary promotion of three Bergen County men to the rank of first lieutenants. They are Herbert Robert Williams, son of Mr. and Mrs. Albert Williams of 70 Beverly Road, Oradell; Rudolph Vincent Ranieri, son of Mr. and Mrs. Vincent Ranieri of 86 Green Street, Hackensack, and James William Froude, son of Mr. and Mrs. Albert W. Froude of 45 Sheridan Terrace, Ridgewood.

Captain Harris was an accountant for the General Electric Company in Bridgeport, Conn. He attended New York University and entered the service on July 7, 1941.

9-24-44

FLIER KILLED



First Lieutenant Robert William Tratham (above), 25-year-old Teaneck aviator was killed in action over Germany on August 24 on his 20th mission, after which he was to return to the United States to instruct air cadets. He held the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal, and four Oak Leaf Clusters. His mother, Mrs. Edward Delbridge resides at 1560 River Road.

9-24-44

TEANECK MARINE NAMED CAPTAIN

Pawloski Stationed In Pacific

Joseph A. Pawloski, son of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Pawloski of 294 Washington Street, Teaneck, was recently promoted from first lieutenant to captain at a Marine aviation outpost somewhere in the Pacific.

9-23-44