

Survivors

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p.m. on Jan. 8, 1945, in the Lingayen Gulf.

A lone Japanese suicide plane, a kamikazie, loaded with two 500-pound bombs slammed into the CVE-71 port side, amidship, at the waterline.

Fortunately, the bombs didn't explode but the after engine room and machine shop were gone, one of two steam propulsion boilers was out of commission, all power was off, and the ship was beginning to list badly to port.

"It was a fluke," White said. "The plane attacked the Ommaney Bay and was scared off, then hit us."

Strangely enough, the fatalities and casualties from the attack were not caused by the plane's impact, but by friendly fire from a nearby destroyer.

Schuman said the destroyer gun crews were trying to shoot the plane down before it hit the carriers. In their haste, those same crews exploded a five-inch, 38-caliber anti-aircraft round near the starboard side gun sponson.

"That was probably the worst time for me ... picking up the remains of 18 of my shipmates," Schuman said.

Pritchett said he thanked God that day because he had been assigned in the starboard side gun positions in the Leyte action, and was transferred to the port side just before Lingayen Gulf.

"I was scared, but I did my job then. I was a whole lot scared afterwards," Pritchett said. "The man that took my place was killed that day and I was very sad. I'll never forget his name."

White was at his 20-millimeter gun station when the shell exploded nearby.

"I was two doors down from them. It was a mess," White said.

Freeman and Shepard were also

on the starboard side manning their guns, but escaped injury.

Two hours after the attack, the order to abandon ship was given until the ordnance teams could disarm the unexploded Japanese bombs still inside.

During the evacuation of CVE-71, Freeman said he had to slide down a fire hose from the flight deck to a destroyer that was waiting below.

"I think the most scared I was was dropping off that fire hose down onto the destroyer, not knowing who was down there, if anything," Freeman said.

Eventually, the ship was refitted for action and the crew returned.

There are emotional scars that have remained with these men since those days in the South Pacific, but they say the reunions have helped ease the pains.

Lila Shepard said that for a long time, Emerson wouldn't watch any kind of war news on television because it brought back painful memories.

"Since they started having the reunions, I've noticed a change in Emerson. It has been a tremendous help for all of them," she said. "They realize they aren't alone and can open up to talk about their experiences."

"After you've been through the hell we've been through at Saipan, Leyte, and Lingayen, it makes you think you can have a few buddies," Schuman said.

As for fate of the Anzio class carrier, CVE-71 was sold and eventually scrapped in 1955, according to the 1957-58 edition of Jane's Fighting Ships.

Although the ship may be gone, the actions of those who served aboard her have been preserved in the chronicles of naval history and in the stories the survivors tell to their descendants.

"We've all had experiences we probably wouldn't give a million dollars for, but we wouldn't give another million to go back and do it again either," White said.