

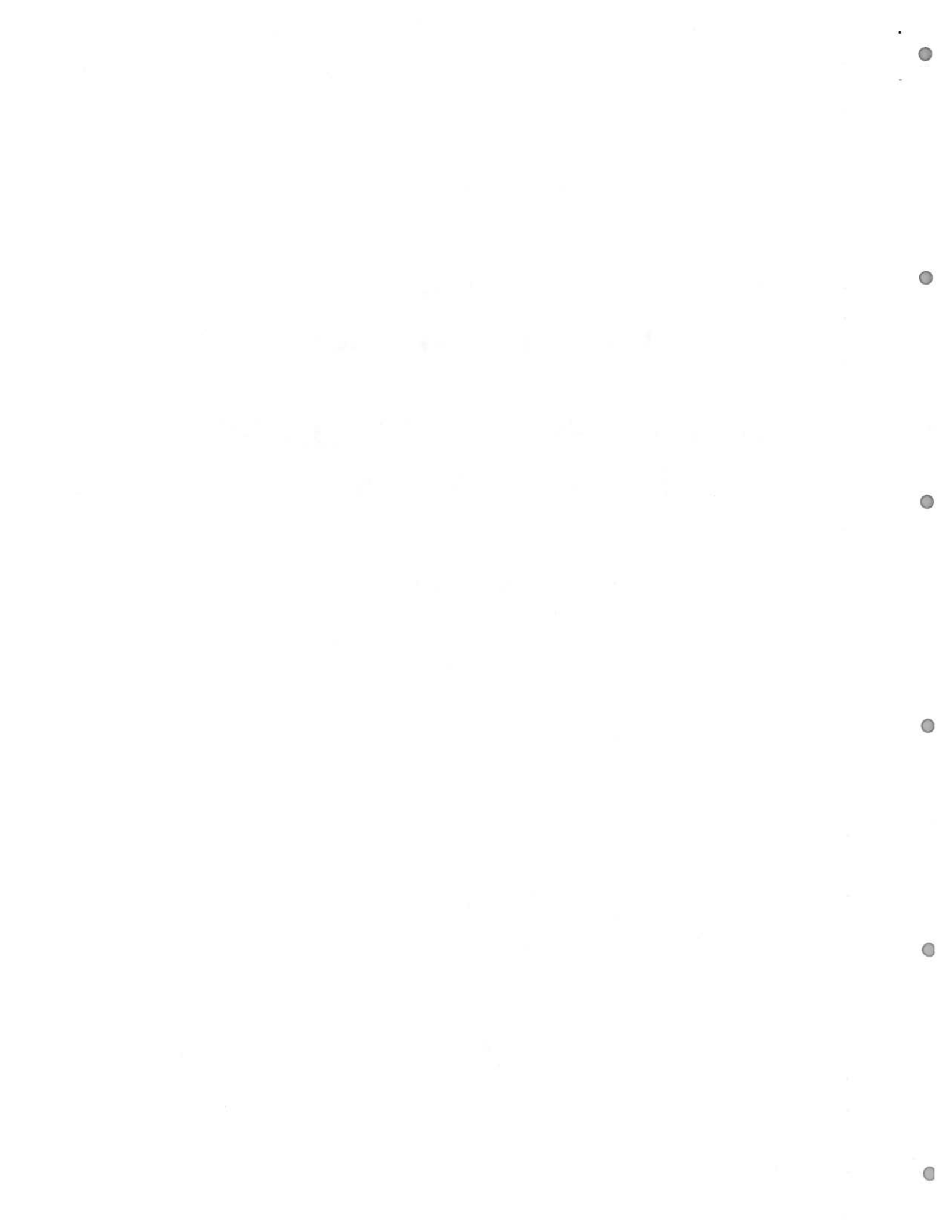
Oral History
Torpedoman
Donald R. Witmer

Duty on USS TWIGGS (DD 591)
During World War II

Interview by
Robert F. Naczi
Naval Historical Foundation
March 7, 1998



Oral History Program
Naval Historical Center
1998



Preface

During World War II, millions of young Americans enlisted or were drafted into the United States Navy to man the largest fleet ever created. Hailing from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Donald R. Witmer would take part in this experience. Having a technical background, Witmer was rated as a torpedoman and was eventually assigned to the USS TWIGGS (DD 591), a FLETCHER class destroyer.

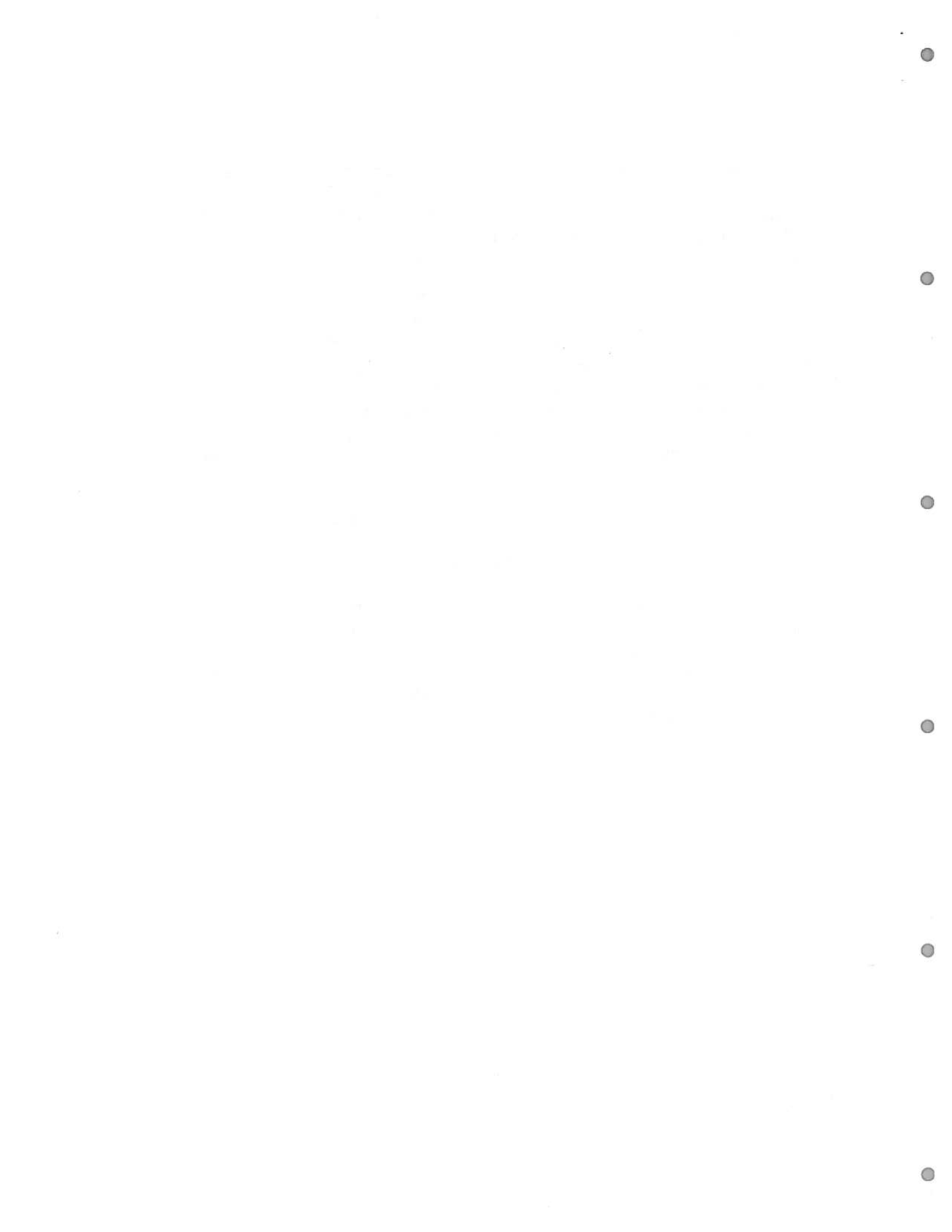
Commissioned on 4 November 1943, TWIGGS would join the Pacific Fleet in 1944 to participate in the Leyte, Luzon, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa invasions. Off Okinawa, TWIGGS would be struck twice by kamikazes. The second strike proved fatal. On 16 June 1945, at 2030, a single, low-flying plane dropped a torpedo, which hit TWIGGS on her port side, exploding in her number two magazine. The plane then circled and completed its mission with a suicide crash. Enveloped in flames, the TWIGGS would sink an hour later. There were 152 sailors, including the skipper, Commander George Phillip, killed. Injured with burns and a broken leg, Witmer was amongst 188 survivors.

Recently, Witmer wrote down his recollections of the attack for a TWIGGS reunion. That vivid recollection has been added as an appendix to this interview.

Robert F. Naczi, a retired chemical engineer from Wilmington, Delaware, conducted the interview on 7 March 1998 on behalf of the Naval Historical Foundation's oral history outreach program. Although not a historian by trade, Naczi has had a long interest in naval history. In 1995, the U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings published his article "Tragedy Strikes in New York Harbor: The Sinking of USS TURNER, DD 648." He prepared well for the interview, studying the ship's history and other materials on the war in the Pacific. In addition, he assisted, along with Witmer, in editing the transcript, insuring correct dates and place names.

The Naval Historical Foundation is grateful for the efforts of these two men to help capture this deckplate perspective of World War II combat.

David F. Winkler
Oral Historian
August 1998



SUMMARY OF MY LIFE

Donald R Witmer

I was born on September 11th 1924 at Lancaster County PA, which, barring unforeseen future happenstance, will be my only home. Both my parents families' resided in this area for many years. My mother-to-be worked as a linotype operator (rare for a female in those days) prior to earning her cap at the Philadelphia School of Nursing. My father, a carpenter by trade, was a veteran of Pennsylvania's 28th Division where he served as a mechanic during WW1. The two were married in 1922 in the Memorial Presbyterian Church where I am still a member. They bought a row home in a new upscale area near the church. My mother gave up her nursing career after the pregnancy and was never to return to work. She had an appendectomy some time after my birth and several months later died of peritonitis. My father, left with an 18 month old baby and a new house must have been presented with quite a crisis. Fortunately my oldest uncle of the five living at that time and his wife who were childless, graciously offered to help. Since they had been helping to tend me during my mother's illness my father accepted, sold the house and we moved in with my uncle and aunt. As an asides to selling the house, my father had not much more than settled the agreement and deposited the money than the bank closed it's doors, never to open them again. He did eventually get all he deposited but only after many,many years.

My aunt was all and more that anyone could ask a real mother to be. We probably both needed each other and we got on wonderfully well but somehow it wasn't quite the same as having my real mother. I never, at least in my youth, got over the scar of insecurity that my mother's untimely death left with me. I was an average to above average student but painfully shy and often with a feeling of angst. I did not and still do not, do well in sports. I can't say that I was the last chosen but I was far from ever being the star. I have over my lifetime engaged in a number of competitive type sports the latest being golf. I enjoyed them as I do golf but as far as beating anyone, it's questionable that I ever did. I'm prone not to keep score.

As I entered high school, my father remarried and purchased a new duplex in the suburbs. My stepmother had a secretarial job with Lukens Steel Co. which she particularly liked and continued to work. The problem was that Lukens Steel was some 30 miles away. The cost in time and money for the commuting was taxing. Until well after the end of the war she depended on an overburdened railroad system with an undependable schedule, as well as having to be delivered to and from the railroad station. It made for long days and many chores, to which I previously had not been accustomed. I see that now as a plus, for it required me to fend more for myself. I always enjoyed school. With a large mortgage and a new house to furnish, there seemed little hope of much financial help toward a higher education. I had selected a vocational course (electrical) and in my senior year I was offered a cooperative with Armstrong World Industries. I went to school for two weeks and worked for two weeks at Armstrong. I seemed to get on well but I was, I think, oversensitive and shy. With the bonding to the other electricians in the group

to which I was assigned, this feeling began to wane. Upon graduation from high school in 1942, while there was some talk of a technical school, I went to work full time at Armstrong, continuing my apprenticeship toward journeyman electrician. Pearl Harbor and WW2 were now the controlling influences and as soon as the opportunity presented, I enlisted in the U S Navy as an alternative to being drafted into the Army.

After my medical discharge from the Navy, and a few months recuperation I returned to Armstrong and my apprenticeship. I thought I would work for a year or two and when the depression struck as it did after WW1, I felt I would be laid off and then could go to college using my GI bill. It never did happen. I had a work restriction for a while which Armstrong dutifully honored but eventually we both forgot about it. As it turned out my torpedoman's training was helpful in my assignment to instrumentation work during and after my earning my journeyman's rating. It was the era of pneumatic controls for industry and I was well positioned to take advantage of it. A torpedo is a classic example of sophisticated pneumatic control and I was already well versed in their operation. I enjoyed building sophisticated control panels at Armstrong and traveled to several of their other plants both in this country and Canada to install and show local personnel how to repair and maintain the controls. Eventually electronics replaced pneumatics and with many courses and much schooling I became skilled in those as well. Before I knew it 10 or 15 years had passed. I realized that I was not to be a college student and that didn't seem to matter all that much. At this time I still used a cane on rare occasions. I thought that dancing might strengthen my legs so I took some dancing lessons. It might just have helped since I haven't used a cane since then. It was there I met Catherine. We hit it off well, enjoying our dancing and other activities. I had no family and she had so many. We married rather late in life, never having had children. I seemed to be accepted into her family and we settled down to a comfortable life. After some 47 years with Armstrong I graduated to the best job I ever had, retirement. We keep as busy as energy permits with gardening, golf, swimming, computing and much, much traveling. We annually attend the reunion of the USS Twiggs (DD591) crew which is combined with our sister ship, the USS Paul Hamilton (DD590).

DRW

8 July 1998

Subjects Covered

Background—Enlisting in the Navy
Boot camp at Sampson, New York—Becoming a torpedoman
Reporting for duty on USS TWIGGS—Shakedown cruise to Bermuda
Return to Norfolk—Collision—En route to Pearl Harbor—Panama Canal
USS FRANKLIN—Operations out of Eniwetok—Manus Island
USS MOUNT HOOD explosion—Leyte Gulf—USS HONOLULU hit
USS OMMANEY BAY survivor rescue
Iwo Jima—Flag raising—Kamikaze activity
Duty stations—AA gun crew duties—Fear in combat
Okinawa—Bombardments—Kamikaze hit
Repair at Kerama Retto by USS HECTOR

Appendix

“The Night of Broken Twiggs”

ORAL HISTORY DONATION

Subject to the terms, conditions and restrictions set forth in this agreement, I

DONALD WITMER do hereby give, donate and convey to the Naval Historical Foundation a nonexclusive, paid-up license throughout the world in the information and responses on tape and in the printed transcript of the tape (hereafter referred to as "the donated materials") provided during the interview conducted by ~~ROBERT NACZI~~ ROBERT NACZI

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Other: _____

* Donald R. Witmer
Interviewee's Signature

08 JULY 1998
Date

From: Executive Director, Naval Historical Foundation
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BERNARD F. CAVALCANTE

March 7, 1998

BOB NACZI: I am interviewing Donald Witmer, Donald was a torpedo man 2nd class on the USS TWIGGS (DD 591). Donald was a plank owner and served on the TWIGGS during her short but productive career in the United States Navy. In getting started I'd like to ask Donald to tell me something about his background before going into the Navy.

DONALD WITMER: Well I was born in Lancaster PA, I didn't really get around all that much before going in the Navy, my father was in the Army and he told me tales of sleeping in trenches and so forth, so I decided that the Navy would be the place for me. I'd either have a nice clean sack to crawl into at the end of the day, or I would have nothing at all and that turned out to be just about the case. When I graduated from high school in 1942, the war had already been under way and some of the people left our class to go into the service but most of them stayed to graduate. After I graduated, I investigated going into the Navy, but enlistments were closed at that time and right after Christmas--I think it was about the second day of the year--they opened enlistments briefly for the Navy and I thought this was my chance to get into the Navy and escape the Army because the draft board would have probably drafted me shortly.

BOB: So, you enlisted in the Navy then Don?

DONALD: Well, there were, I think, openings for 15 enlistees and there must have been 40 people ahead of me in line including the entire High School football team. I thought my chances of getting in the Navy were somewhere between zero to none but to my amazement quite a few of the football players were eliminated for medical reasons so I found myself on my way going to the Navy. I think I had about a week and then I went to the Philadelphia Naval Station for induction into the Navy. After being inducted I had, I think, another week and then I was off to report to Sampson NY, via the Black Diamond Express. The Reading Railroad ran a steam locomotive north toward New York State. Well the Black Diamond might have been black but it certainly wasn't a diamond we spend all night on the train and the soot was really bad and the cars were dirty. By the time I got to Sampson NY, for boot training, I was already pretty well disillusioned, and for breakfast we had a tired old cheese sandwich and an apple or was it an orange, and that was it for breakfast well this wasn't very good.

BOB: Don excuse me Sampson is up near Syracuse isn't it?

DONALD: Yes, it's on one of the Finger Lakes Lake Geneva I think it is.

BOB: You started your boot camp there and finished without incident

DONALD: Yes, unfortunately I don't like cold weather and bootcamp was miserably cold. It was

miserable and was my first time really away from home I was ready to resign near the end of boot camp, however, better days were coming.

BOB: You didn't have much of a choice in 1943.

DONALD: No there was no choice. In boot camp they asked me what areas I wanted to get into and I put down electrician since I had already been working as an electrician and was on my way to earning journeymen status with Armstrong World Industries where I worked before I enlisted. I also put down fire control man and several other things. Well anyway, they needed torpedo men so I got about a week's leave after boot camp and then reported to torpedo school. I spent a few weeks in basic torpedo school without much incident in Newport RI, and after graduating, we went out to the West Coast on a train with a group of other people reporting to San Diego Destroyer Base.

BOB: Don what was your rate at this time?

DONALD: At the graduation of basic school I earned third class rating and I went out to advance training at the Destroyer Base and eventually got 2nd class rating there. That was an eight-week course which included not firing but picking up torpedoes after being fired on their exercise runs, retrieving them bringing them back to the base and tearing them down and reassembling them again. During the evening hours it was really nice because after bootcamp and basic school training we were treated very much like civilian workmen. If we weren't working, we were on liberty or could go on liberty and I thought that was heaven. I could have stayed there a long time.

BOB: So this was late in 43, then what you finished advanced school?

DONALD: Yes, it was somewhere I think around June, or July, or somewhere in that area.

BOB: Then what happened?

DONALD: Then after that I was assigned to a ship's nucleus crew which was being assembled in Norfolk VA. This was just the opposite of where I came from. This was all regulation and no substance. We were supposed to go to school and sometimes training on certain items that I wasn't interested in. I didn't need to go to these schools, but we were supposed to go anyway, so I went, and we got through that and they eventually--I think it was about three or four weeks--assembled enough crews to send us down to Charlestown SC, where the ship was being readied for commissioning.

BOB: When you reached Charleston what stage was the ship in? Had it been launched?

DONALD: Yes, it was launched, but there were workmen all over it. As I recall we stayed in barracks for a while before getting on the ship because there was so much work being done at

nighttime and around the clock on the ship that you just couldn't sleep on it.

BOB: According to the Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships, TWIGGS was commissioned on November 4, 1943. Had you been to sea with the TWIGGS before the fourth?

DONALD: No, I think at that time the commissioning ceremony took place, the Navy accepted the ship before they tried it out. They were anxious for ships. Well anyway we were there for the Commissioning, and we took the ship on shakedown to Bermuda. I remember that we were in Bermuda Harbor at Christmas time and there was a threat of an air raid at that time. It was just a threat, and I don't know why, but we were blacked out and we kind of missed our Christmas dinner. I had been over on the beach for liberty on Christmas day, which I thought would be very nice, but it turned out that Bermuda has their hurricane fences that they put down or boards which they put over their storefronts. They don't just do this during a hurricane they do this whenever they shut down shop. So walking through downtown Hamilton on Christmas day was like walking along the board fence, you couldn't even window shop, Everything was closed. We finally ended up at the USO. It was the only place open. On the way back to the ship anchored out --we had to go out to the ship by little bum boats—there was an air raid drill and everything shut down and the small boats were cautioned to get out to tie up to a larger boat. While we snuggled in close to a larger boat, which never got under way and nothing ever came of it except that we were late getting back to the ship until almost eight or nine o'clock getting back to the ship when we should have been back around four or five. Consequently we missed our Christmas dinner but they gave us a few snacks as I recall so I guess it all turned out well.

BOB: You were in Bermuda for a shakedown?

DONALD: Yes, we operated out of there and then finally after several days we had a mission to perform. We had to pick up and go over towards the Azores and tow a broken down four piper to the states for repairs. Eventually a seagoing tug rendezvous with us to do the job because we were not well equipped to tow a large ship like that and we acted as escort to the tug. When it finally arrived back in Charleston, we went back up to Norfolk, where the nucleus crew had gathered in the first place. We really refined our training there by taking out other nucleus crews to show them around and get them acquainted with the ship. One incident happened during that time while we were training these crews and ourselves was that we had an accident. I had gotten a seven-day leave at the time. What happened was when the skipper took the ship away from the dock, he brought it out a little bit too fast--at least in somebody's opinion--and into the path of an oncoming cargo ship. Neither could avoid the cargo ship putting quite a gash in the fantail of the USS TWIGGS. We did lose one person there, and we also lost our skipper. He was transferred elsewhere and we got a new skipper. When I came back from leave, I found that the ship was not tied up where it should have been. I thought, "oh my goodness the ship left for the Pacific without me, what a catastrophe." Well anyway, we did know enough to go to the Harbor Master's Office and find out what happened. He did relay a message to us and told us the ship was over in drydock at the moment and all hands were turning to, scraping the sides and bottoms of the ship

so I should report for duty over there and that was a rude awakening. Well anyway, they patched up the ship without too much difficulty.

Finally we got underway again and resumed our training for a brief period and then were assigned to a task group that escorted the Big Ben [USS FRANKLIN (CV 13)], one of our big flat tops, through the canal and out to the Pacific. We got to the canal and that was kind of chore to get the Big Ben through the canal. I don't think there was an extra coat of paint to spare in getting it through the canal and one of the remarkable things about the is that the Panama Canal is about 1 percent locks, and 99 percent lake. You just lock up, I think two locks up and one lock down and travel across Panama through a lake. The lake is fresh water so it was the Navy style to break out the fire hoses and pump fresh water through them to hose down the ship and clean off all the spray so that was kind of a festive affair. We were to have leave when we got into Balboa and everybody got dressed for the liberty party, but somebody came down with the mumps so we never did make Balboa. We proceeded up to San Diego and again anchored not too far from the Destroyer base where I had my advanced training.

We stayed and operated around there in company with the Big Ben and several other ships in the area doing training exercises and so forth. We then got ready to head out to Pearl Harbor. I remember that our ship's barber who had two or three Liberty ships shot out from under him saying that he would stay aboard, but if they got out there where the real fighting was, he didn't think he could handle it anymore. Sure enough, right before our departure, he did jump ship, and I can't say that I blamed him too much. I would have been very lenient with him because he was a nervous wreck and I don't think he would have stood it anyway but that was the temper of the times. Very few people got off the ship because of nerves or whatever. We arrived a Pearl Harbor and we enjoyed the liberty there for a while and continued to do gunnery exercises and so forth operating with some of the ships in the area.

BOB: Were you still with the USS FRANKLIN at this time?

DONALD: We left the FRANKLIN at Pearl Harbor. I think we escorted it to Pearl Harbor but that's the last we saw of it. Well we weren't there when Big Ben had its problem as we were operating in other areas at that time. I think that's probably the last we saw of the Big Ben, we went on out, as I recall, more or less alone to Eniwetok, which had been recently liberated. I think it was Eniwetok where we were one of the first ones to get in there. I'm not quite sure how that happened I can't recall, but I do remember that the first day we were in there, I could stand up in the bow and look down the anchor chain to see the anchor. The water was so clear in there that you could actually see it in the bottom of the harbor, but after the fleet pulled in there it wasn't too many days before you could no longer see many links at all in the anchor chains. We operated out of Eniwetok for several weeks anyway, one of our trips was to Saipan to escort supplies to that area and then we finally returned to Pearl Harbor for staging for the Philippines operation which was to be conducted later in that year. In one of our times at Eniwetok, several members of the crew took the whale boat over to a beached two-man Japanese submarine and proceeded to cart away whatever could be carted away. The hierarchy of the Navy took a dim

view of that and they were required to bring everything back and they got themselves into a little trouble with the Captain, but I guess it all turned out well in the end.

At any rate, after we got back to Pearl Harbor for staging, we left for Manus Island, I think it was where the push on the Philippines was to be started. One of the things that happened while we were in the Manus area was that the USS MOUNT HOOD (AE 11), which was anchored in the harbor where we were, through some mishap blew up and it was the closest thing to an atomic explosion that I want to see. There was a gigantic big column of a mushroom cloud that went up with pieces of the ship and whatever, some of them very large. Someone thought--I don't know whether it was true or not--that a boiler went sailing over our ship and splashed in the water. I don't think it was quite that big. It didn't seem that big to me, but nevertheless, there were pieces falling all around us. Fortunately nobody was hurt from the TWIGGS. But there were obviously no survivors from the HOOD and I suppose to any ships that might have been really close it must have been quite a catastrophe. On our way to Manus, which is, of course, below the equator, we crossed the equator and the area where we passed was not too awfully far from Truk. It was still in Japanese hands and at one time was a very potent naval base. However, it had been pretty well neutralized, although we didn't know exactly how well neutralized it was, but it turned out they had no power at all at that particular time. At any rate, we conducted our exercises and initiations for all the pollywogs aboard. Of course, I was one of them. I think they had a target sleeve there and after several other initiations we had to crawl through this target sleeve which was all greased up in the inside and they had a container filled with water there and some shellback was in there and he put your head underwater and said, "are you were pollywog or a shellback" and everyone was conditioned to say pollywog because if they didn't they would get punished. It finally dawned on me that I was now a shellback so I said I was a shellback and they let me go.

From Manus, we escorted a battle group northward towards Leyte Island. We bombarded the beach the first three days we were there. When the transports came on the scene at Leyte Gulf or whatever the area is there and it was really something to see. I never saw so many ships in my life. The landing proceeded, I guess, pretty much according to plan. MacArthur apparently did his thing [October 20, 1944] and we were operating near the USS HONOLULU (CL 48). I can't say exactly what we were doing we may have been screening, Any rate, a single plane came in and dropped a torpedo that hit the HONOLULU. It was the first really bad thing that I had seen. Later in that campaign, we did some firing at the beach and we acted as screens for the transports. Also later in the month, I think it was, the Japanese fleet was on the prowl. We didn't know this at the time, but it became pretty apparent later. I think it was the 25th or 24th of October, when the battle took place in the Philippines between the two navies, the Japanese and the American, and while we weren't in the battle we were assigned to screen the transport area. There was only three destroyers there to screen that whole area and had the Japanese known it they could have moved in there and done really bad damage. As it turned out they turned out their attention to the baby carriers and while they mauled them pretty badly, I think they would have been better off coming in to the transport area. It would certainly have been more dramatic and probably worse on morale. We then left the Philippines for Manus Island. There we staged for an attack on

Mindoro deep inside the Philippine Islands. After supporting this action, we again returned to one of the staging areas--can't tell you which one it--for the bigger assault on Luzon. On this task group, we were escorting several carriers--a large battle group. At any rate, I can't tell you all the names of the vessels included but one of them was the USS OMMANEY BAY (CVE 79), which had the misfortune of being hit severely by a suicide plane and it had to be abandoned. It was burning violently and two of us were dispatched to stay with the OMMANEY BAY while the task group moved on and we picked up survivors and the other destroyer torpedoed the OMMANEY BAY to get rid of it and to put it out of its misery. According to what I've read we picked up 211 survivors--I know it was quite a few--and we transferred them by pulling alongside of a battleship I believe. I know in the middle of the night it was a little scary. If the battleship would have turned a little bit it would have crushed us. But any rate, I think they transferred almost all the personnel that were there by walking. They were able to walk over from one ship to the other. We've transferred quite a few people by breach bouys and boatswains chairs, but as I recall with that amount of people, it would have been quite a task, but I think they walked over. Fortunately, it was calm enough to do that.

BOB: You were moving at the time or did you stop?

DONALD: Well I guess we stopped or slowed down as much as whatever was expedient to keep the ship on an even keel and keep them together, but I don't think we stopped completely. I think we were slightly under way, but not much. Fortunately it was calm enough that we could pull this off. I don't see quite how we did it but we did it. We didn't support too much of the actual landing on Luzon and then returned to Cossol Road (Palau Island) I believe. I'm not sure, this was probably around December maybe sometime in January. We eventually arrived back at Ulithi on I think it was about January 25, or something like that for repairs and refitting and also staging for the push on Iwo Jima which was to take place on Feb 19. We departed Ulithi for Iwo and arrived there almost a three days before the invasion was to take place for bombarding action. On several occasions the B29s came over there and bombed the island and there wasn't anything to see but smoke. You wouldn't think there would be anything still alive on the island but apparently it didn't do nearly the damage that it appeared to have done. We were running close in support prior to the landing and then we supported ground troops. We came close to shore and fired in support of the Army and Marine personnel directing fire for us. One night we turned our searchlights on Mt. Suribachi, which was a real problem. (I think it might have been the second night). The Japanese came crawling out of Mt. Suribachi down to the beachhead and really did some bad damage. On February 23rd some Marines got to the top of Mt Suribachi and raised the flag on top of it, which was the subject of a very famous shot that one of the photographers took. I just happened to be looking over at that area along with several other people on the bridge, and the executive officer spotted it first. He said, "Oh that really looks great, there's Old Glory on top of Mt. Suribachi." So we all looked and I guess we were one of the first ones to see it. The night before when we had the searchlights turned on Suribachi, we apparently got some 50 caliber machine gun fire from there. We didn't realize it at the time, but they probably were trying to shoot out the searchlights. They were pretty good aim too because the next morning up around no. 1 stack where our searchlights were there were some spent 50 caliber projectiles but none of

them caused any damage at all. It certainly didn't put out the searchlights. We didn't even know it was happening at the time.

I guess Iwo lasted almost a full month. We had one incident where we were screening at night time and a plane came directly at us--target angle zero--right across the whole fleet, never did anything to anyone, never dropped any bombs, never noticed anything flew right over top of us, didn't do anything and kept on going, nobody shot at him nobody. I don't know what happened it was just one of those things but he was extremely close at masthead height. I don't know what the idea of that was and never did find out. I think it was really in the Philippine Island where they started serious Kamikaze attacks, which were very disconcerting to the crew and so forth. They must have told those Japanese something that they didn't tell us. At any rate, it was rather nerve wrecking and we had some of that activity at Iwo, but there really weren't too many planes flying in that area because we were Iwo was a little isolated and the Japanese couldn't handily fly there. However, when we got to Okinawa that certainly wasn't the case.

BOB: You're a torpedo man and most of the time your action station or duty station was on the bridge is that right?

DONALD: Yes, I was assigned to the torpedo director for night surface activities.

BOB: Well you weren't using torpedoes. Did you ever use it or fire a torpedo?

DONALD: Fortunately we never had to fire torpedo in anger, we fired torpedoes, but we never fired in anger. It's a bad omen for any ship to have to make a torpedo run. To really make a good torpedo run you have to press in to two thousand yards and that's suicidal range for any of the larger ships.

BOB: Well talking about suicide you were on the bridge and as I understand it for a kamikaze the point of aim was at the bridge? How did you feel with these planes coming at you more or less aiming at you?

DONALD: Well my anti-aircraft station was third loader on a forty millimeter gun directly under the bridge and one time during some of the action, I don't know just where it was, the gun jammed and of course it jammed periodically. There's absolutely nothing a 3rd loader can do for a jammed gun—he's way down in the chain of command there and the only person who can do anything is the 1st loader or one of the gun captains. It's not too bad when you can keep busy and somebody is making an attack on you and you have your job to do, but when you can't do your job, there isn't anything to do except stand there and look silly. It's pretty bad and I did get a panic attack one time and I dropped a 40mm shell and started to turn away and I thought now where am I going to run to—there's no place to run on this ship. You can't hide. There's no place to hide so I went back and picked up the 40mm shell and that was the last of that. I never really felt that way anymore because I didn't feel there was any place for me to go.

BOB: Well then actually during kamikaze attacks you were not a torpedo man as such and you were a loader on a gun?

DONALD: Yes, I had at least three or four stations, one of them was night surface action that would be your torpedo attack mode where I would be assigned to the torpedo director and would fire the torpedoes from the torpedo director. During any aircraft action which was 90 percent of our general quarters at least, I was a Third loader on a 40mm gun. We had a depth charge station. That would be anti-submarine general quarters and there I was a talker who would relate the information from the officer on the deck or whoever had the con on the ship as to when to fire the depth charges. I guess the torpedo officer fired them too I guess he was the fellow who said whether we fired them or not and how we fired. So there were several different....

BOB: Tasks that you had during this time.

DONALD: Yeah.

BOB: After Iwo Jima your next task was to get ready for Okinawa? The invasion of Okinawa I believe started April 1st, were you there or was the TWIGGS there April 1st?

DONALD: Well we were there in March. We were there seven days ahead because I think April 1st was Easter and we were there on Palm Sunday if I remember correctly. At any rate, we were there a full week before the amphibious ships showed up and during that time we were supporting the bombarding group, and we didn't do all that much firing. Some of the bigger ships did most of the firing, but we did some firing at the beach and then we would retire at night. Generally, and at least for the first couple nights, we retired, but I think it runs in my mind we stayed in and around the beach on several occasions before the invasion to harass the Naha Airfield. I think remember that. I don't believe that was after the actual landing took place. I can't be absolutely certain of that but we seemed to do an awful lot of harassing and I'm not sure who was the more harassed, whether it was us or the enemy. Firing all night is kind of disconcerting, just when you kind of settle down and one of the guns go off again you know its not a cold fire or its not a supporting fire or its not fire in anger its just every once in a while it gets to you after quite a few nights in a row.

BOB: You were trying to keep people awake.

DONALD: Well that's right. You keep them upset. You don't let them you don't have any peace well you don't get any peace doing it either so I don't know who came off the worst.

BOB: When did you get into the radar picket duty.

DONALD: Well we were one of the first ships I think to come off of radar station two without being damaged in any way and that was fairly early in the campaign although there was quite a few ships hit previously and the destroyers really had a bad time at Okinawa. I think any

destroyerman really earned his stripes if he went to Okinawa because the suicide planes were really hard on them. Suicide planes didn't mean too awfully much to some of the bigger ships with armored plating and so forth. Midway in the campaign the Japanese sent their large battlewagon down one to sortie south in a more or less suicide attempt and we gathered together a large task group of older battleships, far out numbering anything the Japanese could possibly get together. One of their planes snuck through the armada and suicided one of the ships. I don't know which battleship it was but really it didn't do any damage at all to the ship. It just kind of bounced off, that's not the case in the smaller ships.

BOB: Do you recall how long you were on a picket station at one time?

DONALD: Probably about two days something like that I guess.

BOB: Then you got relieved?

DONALD: Probably something like that as I recall yeah.

BOB: Okay

DONALD: My memory isn't all that great but that's what I recall.

BOB: Where did you go for relief?

DONALD: Well someone came to us after being relieved, we would go back to the staging area or the transport area perhaps and run screening for them or if it was required you might want to get provisions of some sort shells ammunition, etc, etc, from some of the landing craft areas.

BOB: According to the book you were struck by a kamikaze while you were on Picket Station 2?

DONALD: Yes, we were attacked by six planes, no maybe 12, I'm not sure which, but I think it was about 10. Anyway, we had a fairly major attack and there was another destroyer there along with us and the two of us were eventually hit. While we were out there we had a Marine fighter wing under our command. We were director for that Marine fighter wing and they and the two ships accounted for all twelve planes. Of course, two of them accomplished their mission. The one that hit us really almost missed us. He hit our whale boat with his wing and tipped around and the bomb that he was carrying exploded right at the waters edge and put about a 20 foot hole in our side and the bomb was an anti-personnel bomb, and it put a great deal of shrapnel in the area. Now it was the unfortunate circumstance that the damage control party, which was stationed amid ships saw the action coming in on the port side and they kind of went to the starboard. Unfortunately, the plane flew over the top and hooked around and came in on the starboard side and they kind of ran into it. There were five or six people killed and maybe 20 casualties all total-- some of them were pretty bad. I know one fellow who was hit then still has shrapnel and still has

problems to this day due to that action. He still, every once in awhile, goes to the hospital and they fish out another piece of shrapnel or he has something related to that incident.

BOB: The ship was damaged and then you went to the Kerama Retto.

DONALD: Kerama Retto was a natural harbor with not much land around it but there were rocky jagged islands surrounding this harbor area and it made a nice little harbor and they had to repair ships inside there. They were certainly doing a good business because there was quite a few ships being repaired in there and being patched up. Some of them were, of course, so bad that when they went finally got back to the states they were so bad that I didn't think it was worthwhile doing anything with them. We tied up along side the USS NESTOR (ARB 6). I believe it was for about a week and a half or 10 days and they really did a remarkable job patching us up. We felt that we were fairly seaworthy although there was some things that still weren't quite right.

While we were being repaired at Kerama Retto something happened, I don't now exactly what it was. There was apparently heavy weather and some of the ships broke loose from their moorings and proceeded to drift across the harbor, Well I was in my bunk at the time and the word was passed to prepare to go to collision quarters. Well since we never had a drill for collision quarters I didn't know what was going on. If they had just said general quarters it wouldn't of been so bad, but we didn't know what to expect and a lot of people didn't know where to go or what to do. I didn't know and I think that was really more frightening then anything else. The hatches were clogged up and I couldn't get out, the people would get outside the hatch from the compartment, they'd stand there not knowing what to do and kept other people from getting out. Well finally somebody said general quarters and then that kind of straightened it out. People just went to their general quarters station and stayed there, but to be trapped below deck when you're normally up top side and expect to see a hole come crashing through the bulkhead at any moment is not real pleasant. I was glad that night was over. We also had a problem with swimmers in Kerama Retto. While we were being repaired, apparently the Japanese would put people out on the to climb aboard ship and cut peoples throats or whatever in their sleep and that happened, I understand, in one circumstance.

BOB: Ok, I understand that the kamikaze attack was on April 28, you were under repair until May 15, after which time that you did various jobs around the Okinawa area and then the sinking occurred on June 16. You have written a piece and rather then read it into this record, I propose that it be added into the oral history to complete the story of Mr. Witmer's experiences. Mr Witmer finally finished his hospitalization in June of 1946?

DONALD: Yes, yes.

BOB: And then you were discharged?

DONALD: Yes I was.

BOB: That concludes our interview unless there is something else you want to add Don?

DONALD: I don't really think so, I've written this article that is to the best of my knowledge what happened although I can't be sure at this time you know its been a long time.

BOB: That's right. Thank you very much and I'm sure the Naval Historical Foundation thanks you for this oral history.

DONALD: Well thank you for your interest.



The NIGHT of BROKEN TWIGGS

as related by
Don Witmer

In a way it's hard to believe that almost fifty years have slipped by since the night of 16/17 June in 1945, yet in some respects it seems an eternity. Indeed it was an eternity for many of the crew of the USS Twiggs and for the destroyer herself. I no longer remember so vividly the sights, sounds and worst, of all, the smells of that night, a blessing indeed, but before it is gone completely I feel I should put some of my memories on paper. This I could not have done just a few years ago. It was, I suppose, too vivid even at that late date. At any rate I'll try to take advantage of this brief window of my mind to record some of my experiences.

The USS Twiggs DD591 had a varied and at times exciting tour of duty since it's commissioning at Charleston SC on Nov. 4th, 1943. Immediately after our shakedown, one of our first assignments was a training mission designed to orient other nucleus crews to their future billets. While performing this service, we gained proficiency at our stations. It was at this time that we experienced our first incident, which may or may not be charged to bad luck and might have portended our future fate. While backing away from our pier at the naval base at Norfolk VA, we crossed the path of a merchant ship, resulting in a large gash in our fantail, and several casualties, including the loss of one life.

A new skipper and four or five campaigns later we found ourselves in the invasion of Okinawa. There are enough notable experiences in that one sentence to fill a couple of articles the size of this one. We participated in the Bonin Island campaign; supported the Philippine invasion; watched in horror as the ammunition ship, Mt. Hood blew up; snatched close to the enemy coast, the doomed crew of a Dumbo (flying boat) which in turn had tried to pick up a downed pilot; personally saw the flag raised on Mt. Suribachi, Iwo Jima, or at least saw it a few moments after it's raising; picked up a host of survivors from the sinking carrier, Ominay Bay; depth charged whales; survived heavy weather in the South China Seas; rejoiced at the new life presented to us by our ship's mascot, the dog, Jeannie; participated in shell back initiations dangerously close to the enemy stronghold of Truk; survived several unsuccessful kamakazi attacks; etc. etc.

All these things were but a prelude to Okinawa where the courage and resolve of the destroyer men and their ships were sorely tested. Japan's Kamakazi attacks, while probably not too effective in the outcome of the war in the Pacific, certainly played havoc with the destroyers, especially those assigned to radar picket duty. According to the records I've seen, 9 destroyers were sunk and 21 were damaged, some severely, while on Radar Picket duty at Okinawa alone. We paid the price for returning to "Roger Peter 2", after completing a previous brief assignment unscathed. Roger

Peter 2 or Radar Picket Station #2 was in the hot corner between the main islands of Japan and Okinawa. These stations which surrounded the sea frontier about the island of Okinawa were designed to give the invading forces some early warning of air raids or other incursions of the enemy. Our second assignment resulted in a grazing hit that caused a twenty foot gash near the bow of the ship, killing 10 men and seriously wounding 8 others including the executive officer. The gash was patched by the repair ship on site at Okinawa. The hit allegedly caused structural damage and the scuttlebutt had it that we were destined to go stateside for major repairs and refit.

In short, on that day of our destiny, we considered ourselves seasoned sailors, in a battle-scarred ship. Being a torpedoman, I stood my condition watch, as well as my general quarters station, on the bridge, manning the starboard torpedo director. I had come on watch at 2000 hours and after the usual chit chat over the JU talker (the sound powered head set circuit associated with the firing of torpedoes and depth charges) had just settled down on the canvas covered flag bags on the rear of the port side of the bridge. It was a good spot where I could stay attached to the phones, see what was going on and still be out of the way if someone needed to navigate the narrow passageway in a hurry. O K, so it was comfortable, too. Our position was off the southern end of Okinawa, and through the gloom and afterglow of evening I could just barely make out the cliffs of the still-contested island on our port quarter. We were to fire at this sector of the Japanese-held beach throughout the night using the 'condition 2 watch' (four on and four off) to accomplish the shooting. We had done this many times before. It was always, in my mind, a moot question who was harassed the most, the Japanese or the off watch, but this, of course, is the essence of war. Rumors had it that we were given the choice of firing at the beach or off loading our ammo' by hand prior to our returning to the West Coast. It may have been true. I, for one, didn't believe it but, somehow, it did tend to lighten the chore, even in spite of my pessimism.

About half past eight, I became aware of a slight commotion forward, and the Chief Signalman came by me yelling "He dropped something". I may have fleetingly heard the plane but it was only an instant till I felt as though I was caught under a shifting pile of coal, being buffeted along, unable to do anything. I had no sense of a loud explosion, more like a swooshing or roaring sound. I did not know it then, but a single plane had dropped an aerial torpedo that hit us forward between #1 and #2 5-inch magazines. I was, if not actually unconscious, disoriented to the point of being inoperable. When I was able to collect my senses and try to comprehend what happened I became aware of the screams and the yells above, below and around me. I realized, of course, that we had been hit, but in no way could I determine my condition or where I was. Everything was in turmoil, nothing being recognizable. Fires were burning nearby and coals and glowing embers were everywhere. I recall remembering a movie where one sad scene showed a white hat floating on a calm sea after a dramatic naval engagement and thinking that my white hat was in my locker back aft and was destined not to float. I recalled the letter home I had just written which had no chance for delivery. All the while I was calling rather meekly and quite politely, I believe, "If someone can hear me would you please help me". Gradually the sounds of the others died down and I became more aware of my circumstances. I realized that my right leg seemed to be hopelessly entangled in the debris. I briefly thought of cutting off my leg in order to free myself. I rejected that grim solution as too high a risk of bleeding to death. By doing so I was spared the hard truth of seeing if I could indeed perform the grisly act.

I gradually became aware of at least two others in my presence by some nearby talking. I called and heard the Officer of the Deck and the Chief Signalman identify themselves. When I reported who I was, the O.O.D. said "Witmer, thank God! Give us a hand. We're being burned alive!" I replied saying "I can't. I'm trapped, too". Though I believe he tried to hide his despair, the O.O.D.'s plaintive comment was "Heaven help us". That about ended our three way discourse, as I remember.

About this time that I realized I was in the area of the Captain's head and soaking wet, probably from the commode or more likely from ruptured pipes. This may well have been very important, since the talk between the O.O.D. and the chief signalman was mostly about burning, with the signalman's repeated request for the O.O.D.'s knife. I heard the O.O.D. say "No, as long as we are alive there is still hope". After some length of time, he must have relented for the last thing I heard from either of them was the signalman saying "I must be a tough S.O.B.. I cut my throat and both my wrists and I'm still alive". I really had no sensation of being burned at the time though later some wounds on my legs may have been from burns.

As my head became clearer and I tried to free myself, I realized that I was lying with my right leg straddling the bulkhead door to the Captain's head with one of the dogs on the hatch trapping my leg. In due time I solved this puzzle and was able to literally pick up my leg and extricate it from what earlier seemed hopeless entrapment. I was at last free to squirm and move about. I could even raise up a bit in order to survey my still very unfamiliar surroundings. I managed to look forward to where the earlier and now silent voices came from and saw what appeared to be two or three bodies, blackened and burnt. I called, but what earlier produced a chorus of pleas and yells now produced only silence. I still was not out of the area of major destruction, but apparently the way was clear for I eventually emerged to a recognizable area near the forward funnel on the torpedo deck.

It was then that Hugh Molloy S1c spotted me and drug me out the rest of the way. He told me there were more survivors back on the fantail. He said he would get me aft. However about that time the 40mm storage locker was making a tremendous racket. Molloy said he came forward through it and could get me back but I didn't like the looks of it. He got a life preserver from some one who no longer needed it, and we set about the task of getting me and my broken femur down the ladder to the sea deck. He did a good job, and I don't remember it as being too difficult on me. When we did get down to the main deck the 40mm locker seemed even more threatening, and we both agreed that I should enter the water from the main deck. The water was even with the main deck, so that task was an easy one. We said our good-byes, and I slid off into the rejuvenating waters of the Pacific. The water felt so good to me, and it was a great temptation to relax in it. It was apparent that the ship was in immediate prospects of sinking. I realized it would be wise to put some distance between me and the ship. I paddled as well I could and before long had covered a sizable distance. It was a good thing, for there were several blasts aboard the Twiggs. The ship gave quite a heave and slipped beneath the waves. The explosions probably set fire to floating fuel oil. Before long I found I was surrounded by a sea of flames. I remembered my boot training at their new swimming pool at Sampson Naval Training Station, and how one could supposedly splash about and fend off the burning oil. I can attest to it working, at least in my case. Soon the oil burned itself out and the world was again claimed by darkness and silence.

The shores of the enemy held beaches seemed to loom ever closer. Then suddenly out of the darkness emerged the hull of a destroyer heading directly for me. It was traveling slowly and silently, almost ghostly, through the night, looking for survivors. I yelled, but I was so close aboard that I could see they were looking much too far ahead. The ship was almost on top of me. I yelled "I'm down here" and with a shout, they all saw me. I heard the O.O.D. give the helmsman an curt "hard right rudder". Someone of the crew with a great arm threw a line which landed two or three feet from me. It might have been a world apart, for though I came within inches, I could not get to it. As silently as she came the destroyer was swallowed up by the night, and I never saw her again. I was alone again in the night. I contemplated the shore line. It seemed closer, but maybe it was my imagination.

Then, the silence of the night was broken by some talking and the distant, unmistakable sound of a motor whale boat's engine. After some repeated yelling back and forth we established contact and soon many willing hands lifted me into the whaleboat. They tried to get me to sit up but I finally convinced them I would be more comfortable lying on the deck. After a short trip, with me lying in a crumpled heap in the bilge, they pulled up along side a destroyer, which I later found to be the destroyer, USS Putnam. She had cargo nets draped over her port side and I managed with the help of many to again perform the climbing trick with a broken leg. I remember as I lay on the quarter deck some one asked me what was wrong with me. When I replied "A broken leg", he wanted to know how I knew it was broken. I told him that my leg, which was lying at a crazy angle, didn't always bend in the middle like that. That seemed to amuse him but I didn't say it to be funny, at all. I heard some one say "Take him up to the Captain's cabin." Over my protests, they put me, dripping with bunker "C" fuel oil, in the Captain's crisp snowy-white bed.

My objections also seemed to amuse them, but then it wasn't their bed. Some time during the night I was transferred to the USS Alfred Samuels, PCE(R) 852. It was a small patrol craft, rigged as a hospital ship. They put a splint on my leg but as it seemed, to me each facility didn't like the previous one's work. The USS Rescue didn't think much of it. Guam sneered at Rescue's efforts I, consequently received more than my fair share of casts before my last one at the Naval Hospital at Seattle WA some four and a half months later. While the hospital facilities were big on cast making, they left a lot to be desired when it came to hair washing. I dirtied, irretrievably, I believe, a countless amount of pillows in my journey back across the Pacific. When I got back to the USA, the fuel oil in my hair was still making my pillows, if no longer black, a grimy brown. Finally, in Oakland, perhaps a month later, some gracious nurse finally washed my head. I eventually began to feel like a survivor. About a year after the sinking I received a medical discharge from the Philadelphia Naval Hospital while still on crutches. I feel that every day after the sinking is a bonus day in my life and to be cherished. My broken leg did not respond quickly to treatment, due to my acrobatics during the sinking and still gives me a bit of trouble, but what's a body to do at a time like that? All in all, I feel was one very lucky guy!