

From a WW II Memoir

Carl Dowdey and Jim Minick

This is a work of nonfiction. These events happened over seventy years ago, and though my family says my memory is good, it's not that good, even for someone in his nineties. So these stories are as close to the truth as I remember it. —Carl Dowdey

A Little Taller

In 1941, a neighbor came by the house and asked, "Have you heard the news?" We had not, so he said, "Japan has bombed Pearl Harbor." I was seventeen, young enough to think World War II would be over before I would be involved. How wrong I was!

Like most families of that time, we listened to the radio war reports every day and we flew our flag. Men up and down our street enlisted, and like everyone, our family had to get used to rationing rubber tires and gasoline, among other things. The war involved us all, and that flag helped us pull together.

In February 1944, I was commissioned an Ensign in the Navy, and so I was on my way. I became the engineering officer of USS-LCI (M) 1012. My job was to keep all eight of our main diesel engines running, and I had a crew of seven men to help. Our gang learned quickly what we had to do, and this meant we always had oil under our fingernails.

February 19th, 1945 is in my brain just like a birthdate. D-Day at Iwo Jima. Early on, when we were still miles away, we saw the arc and flare of guns from our battleship. That ship and others systematically bombed as much of the island as they could, trying to destroy the Japanese tunnels and installations, but everyone on my ship knew they could only do so much.

Closer to shore, everything looked just as peaceful and beautiful as a vacation beach, quiet, too, except for the barrage from our ships. That mountain, Mt. Suribachi, rose straight up out of the ocean, an old volcano covered with jungle but for the bare steep slopes.

When the invasion started, we took position right at the edge of the water, maybe twenty-five feet from shore. We lined up with other LCIs to form a channel for troops to come in on their LCVP Higgins boats. We kept firing at the enemy, trying to protect our landing troops. Japanese mortars fell all around us. One hit an LCVP full of men and blew it apart. Somehow we didn't get hit.

A day or so after D-Day, my ship was lying to about one-half mile off the shore. Like several other ships around us, we waited for instructions. We had our guns loaded and men in position, just watching and ready to shoot. We were too far from the island to see the battle, but we could hear it.

Late in the evening, the skipper and I stood in the conning tower, peering through field glasses across that wide water. The weather had cleared, and the temperature turned cool. We heard gunfire and watched for Japanese rockets as best we could. But you can't really see a rocket, just its trail of sparks. The time between launching and landing was only about seven seconds, so by looking at the trajectory, we could anticipate where it would explode. If that trail of sparks went directly vertical, it meant the rocket was either coming at us or going away. You just hoped it was going away.

One particular trail of sparks made us both look. The sparks went vertical. I said, "Skipper, it's coming our way." He said, "No, I think it's going away." Immediately, there was a high-pitched descending whistle of a scream in the air, and there was no doubt about its direction.

The two of us dropped to the bottom of the conning tower. The Japanese bomb plunged into the ocean somewhere very close, leaving no waves, and thankfully no damage.

At some point, we received orders to proceed to the north end of Iwo Jima. Our Marines had pinpointed an area of trouble. We only knew the coordinates, never what the target really was, probably a Japanese maze of tunnels or a pillbox. We shot a whole bunch of mortar rounds, but from that distance, we never knew the results, and with so many of our Marines onshore, we could do little else to help.

A Navy commander told us that all enemy guns had been destroyed, all that they could find, so we stayed cautious, but no longer worried as much about anymore shells coming at us. We were just lying to. On watch. Staring at that hunk of leftover lava. Waiting. I remember a tank scooting across the land shooting flames down into two tunnel entrances—a thirty-foot blast of fire.

Then on February 23, 1945, I was on the gun deck, when word passed. A radioman on ship had picked up word from California about the flag. I looked to the tip of the island and there it was, the American flag, just after it was raised on top of Mount Suribachi.

From our ship's deck, I figured Mount Suribachi was around 550 feet tall, roughly the same height as the Washington Monument I saw as a kid. Once that flag waved from the peak, that mountain grew a little taller. All of us did that day.

Entangled

World War II had ended, and my ship, LCI(M) 1012, was on its way home along with five other LCIs. But first our small flotilla had to stop in Saipan to refuel, and as we approached the island, something tangled in our starboard propeller. What, we couldn't tell, but I guessed a long line of rope or some piece of trash. The vibration shook the stern and traveled through my feet all the way into my teeth—unbearable. Whatever it was slowed our speed and might damage the propeller. We couldn't ship out across the wide Pacific with that tangled propeller, and the commander told us that if the ship's force couldn't fix it, we'd have to go into dry dock. But we had buddies on those other ships, and we wanted to get home, and I didn't really want us to have to cross those 4,000 miles by ourselves.

So the other ships anchored in the shallow water off of Saipan. Before we joined them, we revved to full speed, then suddenly shut down the engine; we put the ship to full back, and again stopped the shaft rotation. Nothing worked. Whatever held us wouldn't let go, and we only had a day here, maybe two, to try to correct this problem.

I had one last idea, and I didn't really like it at all. I wasn't going to ask my men to do anything I wouldn't do, so I gathered up what I needed—a six-inch knife, a gas mask, and an air hose.

I knew I couldn't hold my breath long enough to do the job—I needed a supply of air. So I slid the hose under the gas mask. That air would also keep the water out so I could see. A few of my engine room gang, especially my top motor mac, didn't think it would work, but I told them it was worth a try.

Several men positioned themselves around the stern deck rail, each with a rifle, each on the lookout for sharks. I tied a rope around my waist and told my gang that if I yanked hard, they better start pulling me in fast. My top motor man opened the air valve just a notch. I gripped my knife and lowered myself off the anchor rack and into the water, where I dove to get under the ship. Four or five feet down, the water was warm and murky; little light reached that depth and I could barely see the propellers or whatever tangled there. My gas-mask-air-tube held, so I swam toward the propeller. Like I guessed, it was a rope, maybe twenty feet of three-inch line cast off from another ship. I reached the propeller and started cutting.

I worked on that rope for maybe three minutes. About halfway through it, I saw something coming at me—gray or bluish, about the size and shape of a shark's face. I lashed out with the knife, but felt nothing. I raced back to the anchor rack, climbed out, and perched there breathing hard, watching the water. The men asked what happened, and I just shook my head. And then we all saw it—a large oil rag just floating by. That rag calmed my nerves. Better to see it than a shark.

After fifteen minutes, I decided to go back down and finish the job. I slid the gas-mask-air-tube back on and swam until I found that massive rope. No more rags floated by, so I quickly cut until the rope broke free and drifted away.

Back onboard, we tested the propeller and it ran fine. We radioed the commander that we'd fixed the problem and were ready to go. The next day, we headed home.

The Surprise Gift

World War II had ended and my ship, USS-LCI (M) 1012, along with a small fleet of other LCIs, approached the Hawaiian Islands. I was taking my shift in the conning tower, watching out for other ships or obstructions in the water that might damage the ship. On clear days, I liked it up there—good breezes, a view, some solitude from the tight quarters below.

When we were about thirty miles from land, I spotted a huge bird on the bow rail. I wondered how it landed there without me seeing it fly up. I was supposed to see everything, and somehow it had slipped under my view and landed quietly there without my notice.

The bird stretched its wings and that span looked like at least eight feet wide. Then it tucked its head behind a wing and fell asleep. I had never seen an albatross before, but I'm pretty sure that's what it was.

Soon, a sailor came walking past on the bow. I asked if he wanted a bird. He looked to where I pointed. He could have said no, or perhaps he wondered what we could do with such a big bird. Eat it, maybe? He looked at me and then at the bird and back at me. He shrugged his shoulders and went into a crouch and started sneaking toward the albatross.

The sailor was quiet and slow as he approached the bird's blind side. He got closer and closer—I didn't think he had a chance—I mean this bird lived out on the ocean, it had terrific vision, it knew danger and how to avoid it—but that albatross kept its head tucked in its feathers, sleeping.

Three feet from the bird, the sailor lunged and got it. I couldn't believe it! He clasped both hands around the bulky body and the squirming mass of feathers. That albatross in all of its shock and fright did what any big bird is designed to do—it sprayed that sailor from top to

bottom, from face to toes, with a grayish mess of wet and slimy poop. I mean that sailor was covered and soaked. And, as you can guess, he was angry. I tried not to laugh, but how could you not? He turned to me and yelled, "You knew! You knew that's what would happen!" Of course I didn't and told him so, but he never believed.

The bird with that long wingspan flew off the ship toward land.

Years later, I read the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner"—I'm just glad we didn't kill that albatross. Who knows what might've happened?

Glint and Dark

After the war, my ship delivered mail from Okinawa to Japan. I didn't mind—better letters than bombs, better to sail past that beach than to set anchor and send up smoke screens and then watch a dead body float by.

Back then, I had been in charge of the engines, but after the Armistice, I was made captain, in charge of this LCI and the twenty-five men it took to run it.

You want to relax when the swells are moderate; they rock the ship like a cradle. Plus, the war was over—no more submarines, no more planes like the one that launched a torpedo we watched come right at us only to miss our keel by a few feet and come out on the other side and keep going. We shot and shot at that plane, but it got away.

We all knew better than to relax, though. A mine-sweeper sunk a few weeks earlier. That captain and his crew were just doing their jobs, trying to snag mines. Then the ship got too close to one and all on board died.

One day, we left Kagoshima Bay on a mail run back to Okinawa. The sun had crossed most of the sky, and soon we saw no more land and no other ships, just us and those rocking, easy waves. They cast shadows, those waves—glint and dark, glint and dark—quiet and easy. The motors hummed far below; the hull made its own rushing sound of whitecaps.

I was alone in the conning tower, with my shipmates below. I'd yell down the voice tube, "All ahead one third" or "Left 10," and the First Mate righted our ship.

Then I saw it—the color of water and the size of a small dolphin. But it just floated there—glint and dark, glint and dark—about 300 feet ahead. I knew what it was: a damn mine, leftover from the war. Maybe one of ours or maybe one of theirs. It didn't matter. We were headed almost right for it.

What could I do? If I put the ship in full reverse, our speed would still carry us right over it. To starboard would put us even closer, and to port would kick the fantail out and probably hit it. We were 300 tons, 158 feet long, with a 23 foot beam, and at the time, we were doing about 9 knots. We were like a giant eagle diving for a giant duck, realizing too late we didn't want that duck.

Panic filled my throat and took my voice; the mine came closer; any moment, I'd hear that metal knock.

Then we were on it. I fell to the deck and jammed my fingers into my ears, and waited.

The motors hummed below just pushing us on.

Nothing happened. No thunk of metal no explosion no sudden tilt and taking on of water no sirens no shouts no men slapping on life jackets no yelling for life boats no maydays

over the radio no jumping no swimming no waiting for sharks or rescue or whatever came next. Nothing.

Maybe the bow wave pushed it away. Somehow, the ship passed. I grabbed the rail, pulled myself up, and looked aft. There it floated, 200 feet back, bobbing in our wake.

I yelled down, "ALL STOP," and "Right 10." The ship lurched and yawed. Then, "All hands on deck," and they came out in the light, looking around, seeing where I pointed. We pulled out our rifles and took turns shooting 20mm shells, but even our best marksmen couldn't hit that mine in just the right spot.

For a moment, the sun sat like an explosion on the far horizon, and then dusk came on. I didn't want to be anywhere close to that drifting mine when it got dark, so we left it bobbing in that wide sea. I just hoped no one else, not even the Japs, would ever strike it and go down.

Carl Dowdey died at age 95 in 2019. Mr. Dowdey served his country in the Navy in World War II. He fought in the Pacific and said, "I saw the American flag just after it was raised on top of Mt. Suribachi at Iwo Jima. That flag was a wonderful sight. We should never forget the high price that was paid for the liberty and freedom we enjoy in this country." He graduated from the University of South Carolina with a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering and was a design engineer for Duke Power for thirty years.

Jim Minick is the author of five books, including the novel *Fire Is Your Water*, winner of the Appalachian Book of the Year Award, and *The Blueberry Years: A Memoir of Farm and Family*, winner of the SIBA Best Nonfiction Book of the Year Award. His work has appeared in many publications including *The New York Times*, *Poets & Writers*, *Oxford American*, *Orion*, *Shenandoah*, *The Sun*, *Conversations with Wendell Berry*, and *Appalachian Journal*. Currently, he lives in the Virginia mountains and Georgia, where he is Assistant Professor at Augusta University. He was Carl Dowdey's son-in-law for over thirty years.