

## *Book Reviews*

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### ***Hell From the Heavens: The Epic Story of the USS Laffey and World War II's Greatest Kamikaze Attack***

John Wukovits. Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2015. 320 pp. Append. Index. Illus. Biblio. Maps. Notes. \$25.99.

#### **Reviewed by Captain Gerard D. Roncolato, U.S. Navy (Retired)**

Although warfare has radically changed since World War II, lessons learned from the conflict are still relevant. These stories need to be told, lest we forget what war at sea against a capable opponent entails, especially the immense demands placed on ship crews. John Wukovits' *Hell from the Heavens* is first a human-interest story about the crew of the USS *Laffey* (DD-724), an *Allen M. Sumner*-class destroyer that was furiously attacked by kamikazes during the 1945 battle for Okinawa. It describes commissioning a new ship; forging a capable crew out of raw recruits; and training fiercely for the hardest naval combat of the war, countering the kamikaze tactics that began during the 1944 Philippines Campaign. It also follows Commander F. Julian Becton, a combat-experienced skipper, trying to convey to his crew the intensity and sudden violence of the war they were about to join, a sense of what was to come, and how that crew bonded together to survive an incredible attack and bring their ship home. Finally, it is a story of major-power war, at both the personal and doctrinal levels.

Wukovits does an admirable job balancing the crew's experiences with historic events, strategic and tactical considerations, and enemy perspectives, which are too often absent in our World War II libraries. He is not a naval professional, and his dialogue sometimes slips, but these errors are few and far between and do not detract from the book's broader message. Wukovits spends a good deal of time covering the *Laffey's* workup process in a refreshing look at wartime construction and training. Becton was a veteran of the savage fighting around Guadalcanal early in the war. He had witnessed the loss of the first *Laffey* (DD-459), and as the CO of the *Aaron Ward* (DD-483) had a ship sunk from under him during the Solomon Islands Campaign. At the most desperate point in the *Laffey's* struggle off Okinawa, he harkened

back to those days, telling his sailors, “I’ll never abandon ship as long as a gun will fire.”

The 16 April 1945 attack on the *Laffey* lasted an hour and 20 minutes. Twenty-two planes attacked the destroyer; 12 were shot down by the *Laffey*, 6 others crashed into her, and 5 bombs hit or were near misses. Incredibly, despite this pounding the ship stayed afloat. The story of how the *Laffey* survived is the meat of Wukovits’ narrative. The factors that contributed to her success include the superb training of her crew, their brute determination, and their ability to organize into ad hoc teams as the established shipboard organization dissolved under the onslaught. Eventually, the *Laffey* was brought home for repairs. But, like so many of the ships damaged at Okinawa, her participation in the war was over.

The lessons of the *Laffey*’s survival are critical to today’s Navy. First, as Wukovits points out, war *at* sea is fundamentally different than war *from* the sea. The ship’s gunfire support at Normandy was highly effective, but impersonal. Seeing the eyes of a kamikaze pilot as he crashed into the ship made war wholly more personal. Second, training for the chaos of combat when established routines, organization, and communications fail is critical. Ships must be designed and crews must be prepared to fight through such chaos, which requires realistic and thorough engineering and training in peacetime. Third, major-power war is usually long and invariably brutal. Fourth, we invaded Okinawa without air and sea supremacy—picket destroyers, carriers, and many other ships paid a heavy but necessary price. Fifth, there will be losses—perhaps heavy—that must be overcome. This leads to one final lesson: The survival of ships and sailors is often contingent on a close-by ability to render assistance and then to effect major repairs in theater. The Okinawa picket stations had plenty of support, from the accompanying small amphibious escorts (known fittingly as “pallbearers”) and numerous tugs in the vicinity to the significant on-scene repair capability at Ie Shima and Buckner Bay near Okinawa. Those capabilities were in the tactical arena and subjected to frequent air, subsurface, and even suicide surface attack. That commanders chose to keep them so close testifies to their urgent need.

Given the renewed prospects for major combat at sea, today’s naval leaders must consider what confronted naval leaders then: how to prepare the U.S. Navy for such a struggle. How will it be sustained? How will losses be recouped? How will damages be speedily repaired and ships sent back into action? These questions are as relevant today as they were in April 1945.

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