

6-15-1945

John Connor Was Aboard Sunk Destroyer 6-15-1945

Newton Illinois Public Library

Follow this and additional works at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/with_the_colors_1945

Recommended Citation

Newton Illinois Public Library, "John Connor Was Aboard Sunk Destroyer 6-15-1945" (1945). 1945. 170.
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/with_the_colors_1945/170

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the With the Colors: Jasper County IL Servicemen Overseas, 1941-1945 at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in 1945 by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

John Connor Was Aboard Sunk Destroyer

James 1945

Wounded Newton Sailor Was Aboard USS Longshaw When It Was Sunk Off Okinawa

Friends of Gunner's Mate First Class John A. Connor, son of Mr. and Mrs. V. O. Connor of Newton, who was reported wounded in action last week, learned Tuesday that his ship, the USS Longshaw, a destroyer, was sunk by Japanese shore batteries on May 18. She had been caught on a coral reef a mile off Naha, Okinawa island. She went seven minutes after a shell struck her magazines.

An estimated more than two-thirds of the destroyer's personnel was lost in this most tragic chapter of the Okinawan campaign.

The Navy in Washington said the Longshaw was lost with 179 casualties from a normal crew of 250 to 350. The Longshaw's commanding officer, Commander Clarence W. Becker of Salem, Massachusetts, was reported missing.

Shelling Jap Installations

The destroyer was shelling Japanese-held Southern Okinawa and was nosing through apparently safe waters previously navigated successfully by other ships when its hull caught on a coral reef.

The ship had been on the reef almost two hours and a half and a tug had come to her aid before Japanese guns from the direction of Naha fired. The fifth shell caused a terrific explosion, showering the ship's debris upon men struggling in the water and killing or wounding a large number. One of the heroes who miraculously escaped death was 21 year old Radioman First Class James J. Zikus of Peoria, who boarded the destroyer from the tugboat to relay reports to the tug skipper and remained aboard even after the destroyer skipper ordered "abandon ship." Finally he was blown from the bridge into the water.

Were Shifting Ammunition

The most vivid account of the disaster was given by skipper of the salvage tug, Lieutenant John Aitken of Long Island, New York. He boarded the destroyer and conferred with her captain—who was soon to die with his ship—then took soundings from a small boat all around the ship before ordering a towing cable made fast. The destroyer had been shifting ammunition from the forward magazine to the fantail to lighten the bow. Aitken sent Zikus aboard the destroyer with a radio set to make reports to the tug's communications officer, Lieutenant Charles F. Baber of Providence, Rhode Island.

"The tug had been trying for eight minutes to work the destroyer clear when the enemy shore batteries opened on the destroyer," Aitken said.

"The first shot was a near miss, a hundred feet off. The second hit the destroyer forward, knocking out some port batteries.

"The destroyer by this time was countering the enemy guns with its own fire. A third enemy shot hit the bridge on the port side, knocking down the mast.

"Radioman Zikus reported to Lieutenant Barber that the destroyer's skipper came out of the wheelhouse with a bloody hand, but very cool and calm.

Trying to Clear Reef

"A fourth shot hit the destroyer on the port side under the bridge. Word came from Radioman Zikus that the destroyer commander had given orders to abandon ship. Until this time—five minutes after shelling started—the tug and destroyer had both been working with full power trying to clear the reef.

"The power on the destroyer stopped. The crew commenced jumping over the side. Many already had been blown over. Radioman Zikus was still at his station on the bridge.

"A fifth shell hit the destroyer a minute later, causing a terrific explosion. Men and equipment flew high in the air.

"That shot must have hit a magazine filled with hundreds of bags of five inch ammunition. A fuel tank was blown open, throwing two large slicks of burning fuel 150 yards from the ship. Fuel oil also was burning fifty feet all along the port side forward of the destroyer. I believe many of the personnel were burned to death by burning oil.