

A Fateful Day in World War II ~ Clete Ring Remembers

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In 1943 at the age of 17 before completing high school and with the reluctant permission of his parents Clete Ring enlisted into the Navy. If he would have waited to be drafted it would have been the army, but he preferred the Navy.

After training, Clete eventually was assigned, to the *Gambier Bay* which was to support General Douglas McArthur's return to the Philippines. The *Gambier Bay* was a light escort carrier, which meant that it was not heavily armored. Clete characterized where he worked on the ship as "down deep in the bowels of the ship where it was very hot and very noisy."

"On October 25, 1944 a Japanese fleet struck our fleet about 90 miles from land.

The *Gambier Bay* was hit 28 times and sunk after helping to turn back a much larger attacking Japanese force. Early in the battle, the planes on the carrier were pushed off the deck of the ship to reduce fire hazard. Several destroyers and cruisers were also hit and sunk during this battle."

Clete's memory of what happened to him is frightening: "I was in the bottom of the ship when the attack began and knew something was happening because the lights and power went out. I was trying to find my way up and out when I saw that an entire deck of the carrier was gone and water was filling up the ship where the deck had been. I also saw holes in both sides of the ship where big shells – about 16 inch - had entered, exploded and blown a hole on the other side of the ship. This was the most terrifying moment for me. I did not know whether to jump into the water below me and try to swim out the holes, or go up top, or what I should do. Then someone tapped me on the shoulder and said "Follow me." We climbed up the steel ladders to the hanger deck (where planes are stored during maintenance and repair). There was a plane sitting on the hanger deck, and just as we approached the deck, the plane was hit and exploded sending shrapnel into my back and legs. I decided I had to get off the ship and went to the front end where I jumped off - about 35 feet above the water.

When I jumped from the carrier, I saw the Japanese battleship Yamato bearing down on the carrier and firing its big guns. When I hit the water, I was caught in the swirl of the sinking carrier and the wash from the Yamato's propellers and I felt myself being drawn down deeper in the water. I struggled something awful and finally came up for air. I tried to swim away from the ships and saw a life raft in the distance. Somehow I swam to



Gambier Bay

it and found about 24 men hanging on to it. They saw that I was wounded and pulled me into the raft. It had water in it and I thought it might sink with so many people hanging on to it. I must have passed out because I woke up in a hospital ship several days later. When I was stable enough, they sent me to a hospital on land where they did some surgery on me."

After he recovered sufficiently, Clete was sent back to sea duty until the war was over. He participated in other sea battles and received a number of awards for his service. The most significant was the Purple Heart, which is awarded for serious injury or death during war. The other medals were in recognition of his participation in the battle of Samar near Leyte Gulf and other battles in the Pacific.

In the years since the war, he has participated in various reunions of survivors of the *Gambier Bay*. Today, he is one of only six living survivors of that fateful day in the Pacific when the ship went down.

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