

OIL, FIRE, AND FATE

The sinking of the USS *Mississinewa* (AO-59) in WWII
by Japan's Secret Weapon



Michael Mair

Forewords by
James P. Delgado
and
Toshiharu Konada

Epilogue by
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Duty, honor, patriotism, courage, hope, and faith. These words inspired countless members of the twentieth century's "Greatest Generation" who fought for the United States in World War II, the greatest conflict in human history. I heard the same words from aging Japanese veterans who fought to save Japan from inevitable defeat with a devastating, almost incomprehensible weapon, the Imperial Japanese Navy named *kaiten*. The bonds of veterans grow stronger as their numbers dwindle and the triumph of the human spirit in their stories humbles those of us who have exercised the privilege to listen. The tragedy and drama of the USS *Mississinewa* (AO-59) and her Japanese adversaries are compelling. The book title carries deep meaning for USS *Mississinewa* survivors. *Oil, Fire, and Fate*. Oil was her mission, to fuel the US fleet, fire was her tragic end at Ulithi Atoll, and fate chronicles the stories of her unsung heroes as part of the Navy's auxiliary fleet oilers in WWII. I am deeply grateful to Ron Fulleman for locating "Miss" survivors and Tomoko Nishizaki from Hiroshima for bridging the cultural gap with Japanese Pacific war veterans. This book would not have been possible without their selfless devotion to this story. Bob Fulleman connects our *Mississinewa* Reunion Group by publishing the "Scuttlebutt" ship's newsletter and contributed his superb graphics skills for this book. Chip and Pam Lambert searched relentlessly for the long lost *Mississinewa* at Ulithi and found their greatest triumph was not simply locating the long lost wreck of the AO-59 but their development of life enriching friendships with the Ulithians, *Mississinewa* survivors, and their families. Renowned military author and maritime archeologist James P. Delgado mentored my efforts to write this story, calling the *Mississinewa* sinking the "last unsolved mystery of WWII." My heartfelt thanks goes out to *Kaiten-kai* chairman Toshiharu Konada, Minoru Yamada, and Japanese veterans who were willing to share their story that few people in the Western Hemisphere are aware of. To my wife, Nancy, and children B.J. and Tracy, thank you for your unfailing support. My father, *Mississinewa* survivor John "Jack" Mair, was the "catalyst" who broke fifty years of silence to plant the seeds for his legacy and that of his shipmates. I love you, Dad. May you rest in peace.

—Michael Mair



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FOREWORD I

This is more than a book about a ship, its loss, and its rediscovery. This is a story about young men, the legacy of their war as it passes to successive generations and the personal impact of war and tragedy. Author Mike Mair's father was one of the young men who went to war after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Jack Mair joined the crew of one of the often unheralded workhorse heroes of the Navy, the fleet oiler USS *Mississinewa*. In the ship's brief career, *Mississinewa's* crew experienced hard work and the odd mixture of tedium and terror that often characterize war. This vessel and her crew, who might otherwise have passed into history as one of hundreds of craft and hundreds of thousands of veterans in the decades that followed victory in the Pacific, instead gained a grim notoriety on November 20, 1944. On that morning, a *kaiten*—a human-guided torpedo—penetrated the fleet anchorage at Ulithi Atoll and struck the fuel-laden *Mississinewa*. The burning ship sank within two hours, taking some of the crew with her.

The loss of *Mississinewa* remained seared into the memory of the ship's survivors as surely as the flames had seared some of their bodies. A stark and dramatic photograph of *Mississinewa* at Ulithi became one of the memorable images of the war in the Pacific. The dramatic story of the young Japanese who conceived of, built, and operated the *kaiten* torpedoes also became part of the lore and legend of the war—although it was an often misunderstood aspect.

As the son of a *Mississinewa* survivor, Mike Mair grew up with the stories of his father's lost ship and shipmates and the ever-present ghost of the sunken oiler. This inspired the formation of a survivors' reunion group, the careful and passionate amassing of memories and memorabilia, and ultimately, a quest to rediscover the lost *Mississinewa*. It also resulted in this book. It is more than a history. It is the testimonial of a lost ship and lost innocence. It is a testament to a son's love for his father, and his own quest to connect to a time and a day that remained with Jack Mair for as long as he lived. It took dedication and perseverance on an almost unparalleled scale for Mike Mair to bring this story to print, particularly in a time when many

publishers and the media have declared the Second World War and its legacy to no longer be pertinent or of popular interest. They are wrong, and Mike Mair was right in doing what it took to publish this book.

We are all in his debt, just as surely as we are to the generation that fought, suffered, and died in defense of freedom those many decades ago.

— **James P. Delgado**

Executive Director, Institute of Nautical Archaeology (INA), author of *Lost Warships: The Archaeology of War at Sea*, and host of *National Geographic International* television's *The Sea Hunters*

FOREWORD II

Near the end of WWII, the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) made a fateful decision to deploy a new secret weapon named *kaiten*, a “human torpedo.” The first mission in November 1944 was named *Kikusui* undertaken by the newly formed “*Kaiten* Special Attack Forces.” This first mission consisted of three large I-class fleet submarines carrying twelve *kaiten* human torpedoes. On November 20, 1944, our forces attacked the US Navy advanced bases at Ulithi Atoll in the Western Carolines and Kossol Passage in the Palau Islands. Five human torpedoes were launched from *I-47* and *I-36*, attacking the US Third Fleet at Ulithi Atoll, resulting in the loss of the USS *Mississinewa* (AO-59). *I-37*, with her *kaiten* still cradled on her deck, perished with all hands as a result of US anti-submarine forces in Kossol Passage.

Few war stories in the Pacific Ocean have been published so far mentioning *kaiten*, and only vague descriptions about the *Kikusui* attack at Ulithi Atoll have been recorded. Moreover, most accounts of *kaiten* in WWII are little more than fragmentary information as time, points of attack, and strategy were rarely researched after the war by either side. The lack of information from the Japanese side influenced misperceptions regarding the structure and ability of *kaiten* human torpedoes. No clear description existed about the actual attack results at Ulithi Atoll in November 1944 as IJN unleashed its new weapon for the first time. The attack facts regarding *kaiten* at Ulithi seemed to be lost to history.

Just as Americans love their families, my Japanese “sailors in arms” within the IJN realized our responsibility was to protect our nation and our families from the destruction that would be wrought by an invasion of our homeland. Applying for a *kaiten* mission was each pilot’s determination to protect our way of life even by sacrificing our own lives we considered precious.

The escalating difference of war strength between Japan and the US as the Pacific war entered 1944 became increasingly evident to our military forces. The United States possessed overwhelming material superiority, with those of us in uniform feeling that the inevitable result was the destruction

of our people, traditional culture, and our Japanese nation. Our fervent desire was to prevent our Japanese homeland from becoming a battlefield. The Imperial Japanese Navy felt deploying the secret “human torpedo,” similar to Kamikaze was the best choice for Japan, as we had lost both naval and air supremacy. *Kaiten* was considered an effective weapon despite the sacrifice of her pilot. Many young men applied for the opportunity to help Japan in her struggle, and those of us selected in the rigorous process became *kaiten* pilots.

A *kaiten* human torpedo likely piloted by co-inventor Sub-Lt. Sekio Nishina struck the US Navy’s latest class of fleet oiler USS *Mississinewa* (AO-59), anchored within Ulithi Atoll. The 3,418 lb. warhead of Nishina’s human torpedo exploded against the oiler’s starboard side. *Mississinewa* was engulfed in flames and sank with many casualties. Mike Mair, a son of survivor Fireman Second Class John Mair, collected information and materials from *Mississinewa* eyewitnesses and acquired 1944 action reports and deck logs of the US Third Fleet ships involved in this action. He also thoroughly researched *kaiten* from the Japanese side including eyewitness accounts contributed by *kaiten-kai* members. Mike Mair, unlike those before him, completed a detailed record. Many facts are newly discovered due to his research with American and Japanese sources, with his research aided by translator Tomoko Nishazaki from Hiroshima. Mike Mair’s decade long, sincere effort to seek the truth bore fruit, producing an accurate and valuable historic record of this largely unknown event from WWII.

Mike Mair also contributed research regarding *kaiten* missions following *Kikusui* as the human guided weapon, no longer secret, continued deployment until the end of the war. This research Mr. Mair collected was kindly provided to *kaiten-kai*, leading to recent progress in historical research regarding *kaiten* in Japan. Mr. Mair’s contribution to knowledge of *kaiten* as a result of his long quest to write this book has been beneficial to *kaiten-kai* in Japan and I would like to express my deepest gratitude to him.

Wonderful correspondence from Mike Mair has led to pleasant and long overdue exchanges between the USS *Mississinewa* reunion group family and *kaiten-kai*, whose members are former *kaiten* pilots. Also, as a result, more is known about *kaiten* action, especially the *Kikusui* mission detailed in this

book. I sincerely hope that this valuable WWII historical research and story of sacrifice by Japanese and Americans in the mid-twentieth century will be passed down to future generations.

— **Toshiharu Konada**

Chairman of *Kaiten-kai* (All-Japan
Kaiten Pilots Association)

Away All Boats!



USS *Mississinewa* (AO-59) anchored in Hampton Roads, Virginia, 25 May, 1944. Photo taken by NAS Hampton Roads aircraft flying at an altitude of three-hundred feet. NARA photo 80-G-234660

“I believe that a kind of weapon such as a *kaiten*, guided by a human being who faced certain death, should not be regarded as a weapon but an act of desperation!”

— Commander Kennosuke Torisu,
IJN staff

Sub-Lieutenant Sekio Nishina fought to maintain his concentration as his forty-eight-foot long *kaiten* rolled and pitched.¹ Explosions from nearby depth charges reverberated through the hull of his tiny submersible. The *bachimaki* tied around his head was now dirty with grease, oil, and perspiration. In retrospect, he had struggled to master this new weapon in training, but it was not as difficult as now, trapped among one hundred enemy ships. Risking detection by alerted US Navy forces nearby, Nishina wondered, “What was happening near the entrance to Mugai Channel?” Explosions and the sound of ships’ screws were deafening. “What had gone wrong? Had the enemy already discovered the presence of the *Kikusui* Special Attack Force?”

Hours had passed since Commander Zenji Orita surfaced submarine *I-47* in the open sea outside Ulithi Atoll with four *kaiten* attached to the mother submarine's deck. Nishina and his fellow manned torpedo pilots left the interior of *I-47*, climbing into their craft in the pre-dawn darkness, each knowing that the steel hulls would soon become their coffins.

An icy fear grasped his stomach, yet the intense hours of training in Yokuyama Bay took over. Like the Samurai warriors before him, Nishina would die by the code of *bushido*.

"I must not fail . . . the Emperor will reign 10,000 years," he vowed. He instinctively reached to his upper left, adjusting the pitch of his diving planes. Slowly, edging dangerously close to the surface, Nishina cranked the stubby *kaiten* periscope above the water, praying for a target. His worse fear was to die without accomplishing his mission.

The ordinarily calm waters inside Ulithi Atoll, Western Caroline Islands sheltered the US Navy's Third Fleet, the largest naval fleet the world had ever seen. Ulithi's circle of thirty small islands offered a deep-water anchorage for hundreds of ships that would steam from this staging area for the final drive against Japan's home islands.

On Monday, November 20, 1944, the sun rose over the horizon at 0538 and brightened the bright blue sky, interrupted only by a few cumulus clouds.² The temperature quickly reached eighty-four degrees. A slight breeze floated across the deck of USS *Mississinewa* (AO-59) as she lazily swung on her anchor chain directly in the center of Mugai Channel, the broad entrance to Ulithi.³

Task Group 57.9 had gotten underway at 0448 to sortie to Saipan. Cruisers *Chester*, *Pensacola*, and *Salt Lake City*, escorted by destroyers *Dunlap*, *Fanning*, *Cummings*, and *Case* made up the Task Group. They passed the Mugai Channel entrance buoy just prior to sunrise with *Dunlap*, *Fanning*, *Cummings* and *Case* fanning out into an anti-submarine screen for the cruisers. [1]

Minesweeper USS *Vigilance* (AM-324) steamed past the Mugai Channel net buoys at 0523. It was just thirteen hundred yards south of the entrance when a lookout spotted a periscope wake 700 yards off the ship's starboard quarter. The wake, fifteen yards long with a prominent bulge on the forward end, indicated the submerged object was moving at a speed of seven to ten knots

towards the channel entrance. The wake appeared for five seconds, disappeared, and reappeared for another three seconds. *Vigilance* turned to starboard and increased to flank speed. The crew rushed to battle stations and set depth charges for a shallow attack. By the time *Vigilance* reversed course, the wake disappeared and sound gear failed to pick up a clear echo due to the noise generated by patrolling destroyers returning to the channel entrance.

Vigilance flashed a signal to *Cummings*, warning of the suspected submarine's position. Moments later, as *Cummings'* TBS radio signaled a possible intruder, lookouts on *Chester* spotted the periscope wake. [2]

Nine minutes passed since *Vigilance* first sighted the water disturbance. *Case* identified the target as a submarine of the midget type. The TBS radio warned the Task Group Commander that the submarine was close to the starboard beam of *Chester*. The periscope swung toward *Case* and proceeded to turn inside of the destroyer's own turning circle, before passing closely down the starboard side at an estimated speed of fifteen to twenty knots. The attacker made several more radical turns to port at high speed. It looked as if the *kaiten* was lining up for a shot at *Chester*. Since a shallow depth charge pattern might damage the slower *Case*, the ash cans stayed in their racks until attack orders came. *Case* continued to turn with the *kaiten*.

The Japanese pilot kept his periscope trained on *Chester*. This gave *Case* the opportunity to line up and ram the *kaiten* at a speed of more than fifteen knots. Hit just abaft the small conning tower's port side, the *kaiten* broke cleanly in two, the two halves drifting down the port and starboard sides of the destroyer. The destroyer's crew reported oil, smoky vapor, and loose debris, along with a large amount of escaping air and a deep rumbling sound as the *kaiten* sank.

The sinking of the *kaiten* at 0538, barely two miles south of the Mugai Channel entrance, sounded the alarm. TBS radios aboard American vessels anchored throughout Ulithi's Urushi Anchorage spread the word. [3]

Ulithi harbor was now alerted to the threat of Japanese midget submarines possibly attempting to penetrate the lagoon. The Officer of the Deck (OOD) aboard tanker *Cache* reported a swirl in the water. The swirl was between *Cache* and a floating beacon on Roriparaku shoal, bearing approximately 310

degrees true at a distance of 400 yards. Lieutenant Commander Coleman R. Cosgrove watched the swirl, observing a periscope rise and submerge three times. The periscope was visible above the water for a scant three seconds each time. Minutes later, *Mississinewa* would explode, spewing debris and oil skyward. [4]

Aboard *Lackawanna* (AO-40), a tiny wake feather in the water startled the bow watch lookout, Seaman First Class Jimmie King. Quickly glancing at his watch, he saw it was just after 0530. “A periscope. I think I see a periscope!” screamed King, alerting those around him. King lunged for the phone near his watch station. Officer of the Deck, Lieutenant junior grade (j.g.) Milford Romanoff’s pulse quickened as King breathlessly explained his sighting. “Lieutenant, there’s something in the water off the port quarter, could be a periscope or it could be a stick floating.” “I’ll notify Captain Homan,” replied Romanoff.

“Keep an eye on it,” Captain Homan growled, seemingly annoyed that the twenty-three-year-old Lieutenant (j.g.) disturbed his sleep. Romanoff spotted the periscope himself after returning to the bridge, tracking the tiny wake as the feather moved slowly across the bow of *Lackawanna* from port to starboard. The oiler *Mississinewa*, anchored 800 yards away, had swung on her anchor chain only a short time earlier. *Mississinewa*’s starboard side was now exposed to the tiny wake. “Oh, no,” Romanoff muttered under his breath as he glanced in *Mississinewa*’s direction. [5]



Lt. (j.g.) Milford Romanoff, USS *Lackawanna* (AO-40); Photo courtesy of Milford Romanoff

“Keep an eye on it, Romanoff,” berated the young officer when Romanoff reported the second periscope sighting. The Captain rolled over to resume his slumber. Romanoff returned to the bridge, scanning for the periscope track with his binoculars, sighting it for a third and fourth time. The TBS radio crackled on the bridge. Destroyers were circling like angry bees just outside the channel entrance. Romanoff could sense something big was happening. “Where is the captain?” he agonized. “He should be on the bridge.” Romanoff felt a chill go down his spine as the periscope wake

disappeared. Had he really seen an enemy submarine? Lieutenant Romanoff drew in his breath, filled with a sense of foreboding. [6]

Sekio Nishina peered into the eyepiece as his periscope broke the surface of the water. It was now time to make the decision that would end his life. "I must attack now. I can wait no longer." More depth charge explosions reverberated through the hull. He had but a few seconds to select his target. A large tanker loomed the closest, filling Nishina's periscope glass.

Nishina's last view was the large numeral 59 painted on the starboard bow as he took his final bearing on the tanker's midships superstructure. He quickly cranked down the periscope, retracting the eyepiece inside his cramped torpedo. "Attack!"

Nishina reached for the *cbout-su* handle above his head. The *kaiten* surged forward, fifteen feet below the water's surface. The oxygen flow increased to the oxygen/kerosene motors, propelling the underwater missile ever faster toward its victim. Death was certain now and calm settled over Nishina. "I hope my family will pray for me at Yasukuni Shrine."⁴

Mississinewa was riding low in the water, laden with 404,000 gallons of aviation gasoline and a full load of bunker fuel oil for the fleet. She was a floating bomb.

"Torpedo wake," a sailor yelled aboard *Natabala* (AO-60). Chief Gargana ran out of the bridge decoding room just in time to spot the wake pass the stern of his tanker. Captain Palmer Gunnell followed the chief, reaching the bridge exterior as *Mississinewa* exploded, his morning coffee spilling down the front of his uniform. The blast startled Storekeeper Third Class Bob Larkin, who immediately looked skyward for enemy planes. A Boatswain's Mate immediately scrambled past Larkin to get *Natabala's* launch into the water to rescue survivors. [7, 8]

Gunner's Mate First Class Bernie Tarro watched a plume of water rise against the starboard side of *Mississinewa* from the cargo deck of *Caliente* (AO-53) before the sound of the blast reached his ears. Wide-eyed disbelief crossed the face of twenty-four-year-old Tarro as the memory of torpedoes at Pearl Harbor three years earlier flashed through his mind. The carnage on December 7 he witnessed from cruiser *Honolulu* (CL-48) had been indelibly etched in his memory. [9]

Three-thousand-four-hundred-eighteen pounds of high explosive detonated as Nishina's *kaiten* slammed into *Mississinewa's* number three starboard wing tank. The resulting fireball shot skyward, instantly engulfing the forward half of the oiler in a swirling kaleidoscope of red, orange and yellow tongues of flame. Fire reached volatile 100-octane aviation gasoline fumes in the number three centerline tank less than a minute later, exploding with a tumultuous roar.⁵

Garbage from Ship's Cook Third Class Ulus Keeling's galley detail began to sink below the stern of *Lackawanna* when the nearby explosion jarred Keeling. The cook saw the deck of *Mississinewa* heel over to port as the blast rocked the mortally wounded tanker. An angry red fireball engulfed her from bow to bridge, throwing debris hundreds of feet into the air. Keeling released his grip on his garbage can and raced for his 20mm battle station. General Quarters (GQ) began sounding on ships throughout the harbor.⁶ [6, 10]

Keeling reached his 20mm mount in time to see his tanker's launch already half way to the burning oil now spreading out from *Mississinewa's* portside. Billowing black smoke began to blot out the morning sun. Keeling could clearly see the tanker exhibiting a several degree list to port. Without hesitation, small boats from nearby oilers headed towards the fire scene to begin rescue operations. "Save these men, Lord," a silent prayer formed on his lips as he watched *Mississinewa* sailors abandon their burning ship. Keeling felt completely helpless as death claimed sailors who had no choice for escape except leaping into water sheathed in flaming oil. Men wearing life jackets quickly succumbed to the advancing wall of flame. The swimmers simply could not out-pace the burning oil spreading out from the ruptured hull. Keeling observed men without life jackets duck under the oily flames, reappearing repeatedly, surfacing for air. Many miraculously escaped through the burning oil. Destroyers and destroyer escorts circled within Ulithi anchorage, dropping hundreds of depth charges, further endangering survivors in the water. Keeling could do little more than scan the sky for enemy aircraft and pray. [10]

Seaman First Class Linus Hawkins had left *Lackawanna* the previous day to visit a friend aboard heavy cruiser *Cbester*. Now he watched *Cbester* making her way south in Mugai channel towards the open sea about 0515. The

TBS radio crackled to life. From the sounds of it, something big was going on outside Mugai channel entrance. Hawkins noticed a flurry of activity on the bridge when word reached the officers that bow lookout Jimmie King had spotted what looked like a periscope. Hawkins scanned the tankers around his ship and then focused on the lagoon's surface for the alleged periscope. Suddenly, Hawkins was startled by a tremendous concussion from the direction of *Mississinewa*. [11]

Lackawanna Quartermaster Stanley Grimes, posted to the early morning watch, had listened to the ship's TBS radio as *Case* reported ramming a midget submarine outside Mugai Channel.⁷ Dismissing the report, Grimes encouraged signalman Chris Wethingheller to send a Morse code blinker message to *Kankakee*, arranging a beer party on Mog Mog Island for later in the day. Grimes peered through the scope, his attention focused on the *Kankakee*'s bridge, when his eyeglass went black. "You son of a bitch," he growled at Wethingheller, thinking a joke was being played on him. Jolted by the explosion, Grimes quickly realized that it was smoke and debris from *Mississinewa* that was obscuring his vision. He quickly trained his glass on the mushrooming fireball and saw a sight that horrified him: *Mississinewa*'s bow watch sailor was catapulted seventy-five-feet into the air by the explosion, his rifle still slung over his shoulder. Grimes would never forget the sight.

"Hey! We need a bow hook man," someone yelled in the direction of Shipfitter Third Class Jim Anson. He had reached his damage control station at *Lackawanna*'s bow CO₂ tanks when the voice grabbed his attention. Anson could clearly see men jumping off the stricken *Mississinewa* into oil and flames. "Go ahead, Anson," someone said. "You've been a bow hook before. Get aft." Fireman Second Class Jim Factor quickly ran through the rain of hot oil droplets after being abruptly awakened on the fantail and spotted Anson sprinting towards him. Motioning to Anson, "Captain's gig," both sailors leaped into the small boat and sped off toward *Mississinewa*. [5]

Boatswain's Mate Second Class Willie Potter began making his rounds inside *Lackawanna*'s crew quarters just after 0530 reveille to awaken the crew. Some sailors were easier to wake than others, and Potter hated the task. The sailor who slept below Potter's bunk was always reluctant to get out of the sack. "I'll fix him today," twenty-one-year-old Potter gloated as he plotted his strategy.



Willie Potter, Coxswain, USS *Lackawanna* (AO-40); Photo courtesy of Willie Potter



Bill DePoy, S2c, USS *Lackawanna* (AO-40), reached the fire scene in the *Lackawanna* forty-foot launch steered by Coxswain Willie Potter. *Lackawanna* crew would rescue fifty-nine *Mississinewa* sailors. Photo courtesy of Bill DePoy

Potter unhooked the corner chain of the victim's bunk springs, causing the sleepy eyed deckhand to sprawl onto the metal deck with a thud. The pair did not have time to square off over the rude wake up call as a booming explosion interrupted them. Both raced for their respective GQ stations. Potter arrived at his assigned three inch/fifty stern mount only to hear Romanoff's order, "Away all boats." Potter ran for *Lackawanna's* forty-foot motor launch tied to the portside boom.

Seaman Second Class Bill Depoy was still asleep in forward berthing under *Lackawanna's* bridge. The explosion startled the seventeen-year-old deckhand, and he quickly exited the hatch to the forward well deck in time to see angry orange flames rising from *Mississinewa*. Frightened, Depoy sensed this was an enemy attack. Depoy, number two loader on the port side three inch/fifty bow mount, instinctively headed for his GQ station. He arrived just as the public address system squawked, "Away all boats." Depoy's assignment was bow hook for the forty-foot motor launch, so he raced for the stern. He arrived to find Earl Ertel, taking the duties as engineer and Willie Potter acting as coxswain. Nineteen-year-old Motor Machinist's Mate Third Class Earl Ertel was cleaning the bilge in the *Lackawanna* motor launch when Lt. (j.g.) Romanoff ordered, "Away all boats." They scrambled down the boarding ladder and

raced at flank speed towards *Mississinewa*. The boat crew, approaching the port side of the burning tanker, saw heads bobbing in the oily water underneath the smoke, and wondered, "how could they possibly find the struggling survivors in choking smoke and flames?" [12] [13]

Cory Jaramillo, a *Lackawanna* yeoman, immediately thought of his close friend, Art Jaramillo, who had transferred to *Mississinewa* just a few months earlier. The two men were unrelated but had grown up in New Mexico only twenty miles apart. *AO-40* sailors always teased Cory about smooth-talking his “brother” Art when hungry sailors wanted a snack from the galley. Cory ran to the fantail, arriving in time to jump aboard Willie Potter’s forty-foot launch. “Take me with you. Art’s on that ship.” Potter steered the boat towards the fire and explosions. Cory anxiously scanned the water for any sign of his friend.

Approaching the fire scene, rescuers watched as fortunate *Mississinewa* sailors escaped the flames and explosions while entering the water. The boat crew picked up several oil-blackened and burned survivors. Cory was relieved to see Art Jaramillo in the water and hoisted his friend into the launch. Both men heard screams while watching a wall of flame envelop several men attempting to swim away from the danger, but their life jackets inhibited headway. The image haunted the potential rescuers. [14]

Ensign Tom Wicker, Assistant Gunnery Officer, watched his ship’s boats approach the smoke and flames from his vantage point high on *Lackawanna*’s flying bridge. From his position, he could see *Mississinewa* sailors throwing shipmates overboard who hesitated leaving the stricken ship. Confusion and chaos were mixed with foreboding. What had happened? [5]

Water Tender Second Class Joe Fello was midway through his 0400–0800 fire room watch aboard *Lackawanna* when *Mississinewa* was hit. At the sound of the alarm, Fello immediately lit off the second boiler to raise steam in case the ship needed to get underway. More men assigned to the fire room arrived as the GQ alarm rang throughout the ship. “What’s going on?” Fello asked, but no one answered. A strange feeling swept over him. The guys were always “talking it up,” so the silence became eerie. A few minutes later, an engineering officer who was a passenger arrived in the fire room. The officer had been assigned to the fire room in event of a GQ alarm. “What’s happening topside?” asked Fello. “What in the hell is wrong with you?” the officer angrily replied. “Sir, I’ve been below on watch since 0400,” Fello retorted. “Go topside and see for yourself,” the officer muttered. Fello clambered out of the hatch and

saw the largest fire he had ever seen where *Mississinewa* was anchored. Smoke completely obscured the burning ship. [15]

Navigator Lieutenant (j.g.) Lew Davies heard *Mississinewa* explode and felt the concussion. He reported to the bridge as Officer of the Deck, only to find Captain Homan screaming, “Why didn’t someone tell me? My God, why didn’t someone tell me?” at a frustrated and frightened Lieutenant (j.g.) Romanoff. Davies relieved Romanoff as OOD so the junior officer could pursue other duties. Davies, looking in the direction of the burning tanker, could see men abandoning ship over the stern. The TBS radio was busy with traffic now, most of the language in plain talk rather than code. A southern accent on the TBS caught Lt. Davies’ attention as he watched *Lackawanna* boats approach the scene of the fire to rescue survivors. The TBS voice excitedly described midget subs invading the harbor hiding under the keel of US ships. “If they are (enemy midget subs) under our keel, at least they can’t shoot up with torpedoes,” Davies consoled himself. [16]

Lackawanna was now a flurry of activity. Romanoff felt his stomach churn into knots as he ordered, “Away all boats.” Captain Homan, pacing the bridge, exploded in anger, “You gave an order to launch boats? You’re going to send our men in there?” Homan, clearly flustered, waved his arms at the flaming *Mississinewa*. “I’ll court martial you, Romanoff.” Scared silly, as he later admitted, Romanoff turned away and watched survivors jump into Ulithi lagoon to escape the inferno. Milford Romanoff left the bridge and headed for the fantail where the forty-foot launch and whaleboats were preparing to leave for the scene of the blaze. Although shaken by Captain Homan’s threats, Romanoff began to concentrate his efforts on getting the four *Lackawanna* boats underway to the scene of the fire 1,000 yards away off their starboard side. Fifty-nine oil soaked survivors would owe their lives to Romanoff’s courageous decision to disobey his captain. [6]

USS *Lackawanna* (AO-40) 20 November 1944

Anchored in Berth 134, Urushi Anchorage, Ulithi Islands

At 0550 (ITEM) the USS *Mississinewa* anchored broad on our starboard beam, distance 2,000 yards, in berth 131, Urushi Anchorage, Ulithi Islands, had a terrific explosion



Rescuers from USS *Lackawanna* (AO-40) were among the first to arrive on the fire scene. The *Lackawanna* Reunion Group has attempted to obtain belated decorations for her small craft rescuers for over a decade without success. Photo courtesy of USS *Lackawanna* (AO-40) Reunion Group

in her forward gasoline tanks, later determined to have been caused by a torpedo. Other instantaneous explosions quickly followed. We sounded General Quarters and commenced making preparations for getting underway immediately. At 0555 (ITEM) all four of our ship's boats were clear of the boat booms and dispatched to the scene of the disaster to attempt to pick up survivors. [17]

All around *Mississinewa*, the fleet was now at General Quarters. Water Tender Third Class John Smoot aboard *Tallulah* (AO-50) was sound asleep on his "fartsack" mattress when explosions to starboard awoke him. Even from *Mississinewa's* distance, some 2,500 yards, Smoot felt the splatter of raining hot oil droplets. *Tallulah* sailors quickly lowered a whaleboat to rescue survivors as Smoot watched. GQ sent him to the fire room for the remainder of the day. "What's going on topside? Are there subs in the harbor?" With reverberations from the explosions penetrating *Tallulah's* hull, the fire room gang could only hope they were not the next target.

Seventeen-year-old Smoot was worried and scared to death. *Tallulah* had one boiler shut down for repair. The explosions of depth charges repeatedly reverberated through the hull, sounding like thunderclaps to the young man from California. The skipper of *Tallulah* phoned the engine room with the order to change berths to distance their ship from the flaming tanker. The

engine room relayed the message to the fire room where Smoot and other water tenders sweated and swore at the uncooperative boiler. “What if we have to put to sea because of the attack?” Smoot asked the Water Tender in charge. “Keep working, Smoot. The captain could order up flank speed to get us out of here anytime.” Scuttlebutt amongst *Tallulah*'s black gang was rampant. “Why was an oiler attacked with so many carriers and battleships inside Ulithi?” The word from the bridge was that all hands aboard *Mississinewa* survived, but not a man aboard *Tallulah* watching the blazing tanker believed it. [18]

Hot oil droplets raining from the sky also pelted seventeen-year-old Seaman First Class Gordon McDonald as he anxiously scanned the skies from a 40mm Bofor's gun mount aboard *Tallulah*. It was the start of a long day for McDonald and thousands of other US Navy sailors now on alert at Ulithi.

USS *Tallulah* (AO-50) 20 November 1944

Anchored in Berth 135, Ulithi Atoll, Caroline Islands

04-12

Anchored as before. 0550 General Quarters alarm sounded. USS *Mississinewa* was torpedoed about 2,500 yds off our starboard bow and burning. 0600 Two boats were called away for rescue detail to pick up survivors from USS *Mississinewa*. [19]

Aboard *Sepulga* (AO-20), a station oiler built in 1917,⁸ Seaman First Class Bernard Beavin raced to his bridge battle station from the aft crew's quarters. An experienced tanker sailor, having served on *Lackawanna* for fourteen months, Beavin immediately sensed a Japanese attack.

“Whaleboat away,” the loudspeaker announced as *Sepulga*'s small craft cut a wake through the calm water churning at flank speed for the furiously burning tanker off their starboard side. Beavin watched the drama unfold from *Sepulga*'s bridge and marveled at the bravery of their small boat crews steering directly into flaming oil seeking survivors. Later, he was shocked to learn that his brother-in-law Jim Anson was a bow hook man aboard a *Lackawanna* rescue boat. Beavin watched in amazement as flames reached

above *Mississinewa's* masthead. The nineteen-year-old sailor had always assumed that a tanker would simply explode if hit by the enemy. "How can anyone get off that burning ship?" commented Beavin to his friend Edwards, as the pair helplessly watched the tragedy unfold before them. [20]

Seaman First Class George Vollmer who had been peacefully asleep in his hammock, slung below a three inch/fifty mount, awoke and saw flames periodically reach *Mississinewa's* masthead. [21]

Twenty-one-year-old Ensign George Stefanco (Stevens) learned something was going on when *Sepulga's* Officer of the Deck told him enemy activity was taking place outside of Mugai Channel's entrance.⁹ Minutes later, as Stevens stood on deck, he felt a rush of air against his backside and turned around in time to hear the first blast and to see a billowing red-orange fireball engulfing *Mississinewa*. Stevens wondered why tankers were anchored so close to the channel entrance. Stevens hoped his World War I era ship would hold together as deck plates shuddered and shook under his feet from numerous depth charge explosions. [22]

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" shouted *Sepulga's* Captain into his TBS radio as a destroyer escort sent 40mm shells over his stern barely clearing his tanker's stack. The DE was responding to a possible sub sighting, their over-anxious gun crews unable to depress their weapons enough to reach the suspected target. The DE dropped several depth charges over her stern, close to *Sepulga*, blowing 100 rivets out of the old tanker's hull.

A diver was lowered over *Sepulga's* side the next morning to make repairs after the old rusty tanker leaked throughout the night. Ensign Stefanco worked with his engine room sailors to create a makeshift pumping system to evacuate seawater from their leaking hull. The old ship did not have settling tanks, so Stefanco created a high-low set of connections, utilizing fuel hose and a tank adjacent to the fire room. This system served to keep the ancient hull from needing major repair until they later returned to the States in 1945. The CO of *Sepulga* was furious for days with the crew wondering if the skipper would ever stop his tirade against the DE captain. [21, 22]

Seaman Second Class Glenn Bordeman, aboard *Tomahawk (AO-88)*, flung his bedding over the aft catwalk to air out when he heard an explosion to port. Bordeman looked in the direction of the blast in time to see a

plume of smoke rise from *Mississinewa's* mid-section. Seconds later, a large flash and secondary explosion engulfed the tanker. The eighteen-year-old sailor remembered that Captain Benjamin Cloud had thrown a *Tomahawk* shipmate in the brig for five days on bread and water just days before. The sailor had lowered a can into an AV gas tank aboard *Tomahawk*, filled his Zippo lighter with the fluid, and stood on the AV gas tank flicking the lighter to see if it would ignite. Captain Cloud spotted the irresponsible sailor and sent the unfortunate fool to the brig.

Safety was always an issue aboard a Navy tanker. Bordeman was certain a *Mississinewa* sailor had done something just as foolish. He reported to his GQ station, a 20mm gun tub on the flying bridge, as the General Quarters horn blared throughout the ship. Two thousand yards separated *AO-88* from the burning tanker. A destroyer dropping depth charges passed between the two ships and signaled *Tomahawk* to get underway to clear the area. DDs and DEs continued to pound the water surrounding *Mississinewa* with depth charges. Rumors aboard *Tomahawk* said that a Jap midget sub had been sunk inside the lagoon. [23]

Dick Johnson, aboard *Taluga (AO-62)*, watched as two-dozen bobbing heads in oil-covered water struggled to swim away from *Mississinewa's* starboard side. A wall of flame swept over the swimmers and, much to Johnson's horror, none reappeared above the water's surface. With the sound of the GQ alarm ringing in his ears, Johnson raced for his battle station. [24]

Eighteen-year-old Seaman First Class John Sidebottom was asleep in his hammock under a five-inch/thirty-eight mount aboard *Enoree (AO-69)*. The 0545 explosion woke him and five *Enoree* sailors sleeping nearby. The group scanned the sky for enemy planes and then raced for their battle stations. Sidebottom arrived at his battle station on the bow three inch/fifty mount in time to watch Eugene Cooley dive overboard from *Mississinewa's* bow. Sidebottom did not realize until later that he had witnessed the escape of the only sailor who remained alive forward of *Mississinewa's* bridge. [25]

Seaman First Class Bob Shaffer anxiously watched *Mississinewa* burn from his vantage point on a 20mm mount high up on *Enoree's* flying bridge. "An accident?" Shaffer wondered, but his speculation soon gave way to anger as destroyers darted about the lagoon dropping depth charges. This was obviously

an enemy attack. Shaffer, assigned as a bow hook for the Captain's gig, expected to hear the command "Away all boats" at any moment. [26]

Chief Carpenters Mate Dolson Dixon aboard *Enoree* watched debris from the tanker rise over 200 feet into the air. From his vantage point, the fire appeared to envelop the tanker within a minute. [4]

On Falalop Island, several miles to the northeast, Mailman's Mate Second Class Bill Assmann left his tent, heading for morning chow, when a rising column of dense black smoke caught his attention. He ran to the center of the runway to get a clearer view of the mushrooming cloud rising hundreds of feet into the air. Assmann noted the smoke was coming from the direction of Mugai channel. As the column rose, he saw flames within the thick black cloud. The rising mushroom cloud of black smoke tinged with white blotted out the morning sun. Assmann sensed danger and warned others around him. "Let's get away from these trigger happy Marines before they start shooting at anything that moves." The Navy mailmen retreated to the relative safety of their mail hut located on the edge of Falalop airstrip. Navy F6F Hellcat fighters and Marine F4U Corsairs began to warm up on the crushed coral runway with a throaty roar as pilots rushed to get into the air and locate the Japanese attackers. [27]

"The *AO-59* is in our assigned berth," the bridge of USS *Caliente (AO-53)* had signaled Ulithi's harbormaster as they steamed into port on November 19.¹⁰ "Your newly assigned berth is north-north east of her," replied the harbormaster as he made note of *Caliente's* berth. "SNAFU," came the comment from the bridge.¹¹ *Mississinewa's* blast the next morning was so close that *Caliente's* sailors felt their stern was going to come out of the water. Sailors watched a fleet tug race past them to reach the fire scene. Although *Caliente's* Captain ordered a whaleboat to look for survivors, the whaleboat returned empty thirty minutes later. [28]

Nineteen-year-old Seaman First Class Bill Earhart had been sleeping on the starboard side of *Caliente's* cargo deck when a loud ping from within his ship's hull awakened him. The shockwaves from the underwater explosion resonated inside his ship in a peculiar manner. The actual sound of the explosion followed scant seconds later, followed by droplets of hot oil raining down on him.¹² [29]

Motor Machinist's Mate Second Class John Paine was asleep on the after well deck aboard *Cache* (AO-67) when an explosion woke him. GQ rang throughout the ship. Paine grabbed his pants, shoes, and shirt heading aft for his starboard 20mm gun mount. A cruiser floatplane was in the air.¹³ "Don't target that friendly plane," the Gunnery officer phoned down from the bridge. A few minutes later, Paine was ordered off the 20mm gun mount and told to report to the gangway as a gig engineer for a rescue boat. "Can we get there in time?" worried Paine as he watched flames lick at *Mississinewa's* masthead. [30]

USS *Cache* (AO-67) 20 November 1944

Subject: Action Report; Instant to Torpedoing of USS *Mississinewa*

Part 1.

During the early morning of 20 November 1944, at approximately 0530, while at anchor in Ulithi harbor, a vessel on patrol outside the Mugai channel reported by TBS a submarine contact. A few minutes later the same vessel reported sighting and ramming a submarine. At 0547 a violent underwater explosion was observed forward of the midship house on the USS *MISSISSINEWA*. The whole area simultaneously burst into flames. The USS *CACHE* immediately called away fire and rescue party and all boats. Sounded General Quarters and all stations reported manned and ready except for the boat crew stations. Due to the intensity and rapid spread of the flames, the fire and rescue party was considered impracticable and all boats were immediately sent to assist in picking up survivors of the *MISSISSINEWA*. As General Quarters was sounded the officer of the deck made a report to the commanding officer that he saw an unusual swirl in the water bearing 300 degrees T, distance 400 yards from the white beacon on Roriparakku shoal. The commanding officer shortly after saw what he believed to be a submarine periscope raise and lower

three distinct times remaining in sight only a few seconds each time. This periscope was directly in the same area that the swirling water appeared and it appeared that the submarine was making approximately 180 degree turn to the left. As soon as the engine was ready, the *CACHE* shifted berth to clear the area of fire and flying debris from the explosions on the *MISSISSINEWA*. [31]

Pamanset (AO-85) was at anchor in berth thirty-three, a short distance north and off *Mississinewa*'s starboard beam. The skipper saw forward parts of the stricken tanker catch fire as the sound of two explosions echoed across the water separating the two Navy vessels. Within seconds, flames enveloped *Mississinewa*. Hastily assembled fire and rescue parties departed by motor launch at 0602 bound for the scene of the fire. All stations were manned and *Pamanset*'s own oil cargo tanks rigged for steam smothering in the event she was the next target. [32]

Storekeeper Third Class Paul Johnson had a bird's eye view of the tragedy from the forward crow's nest. The crow's nest afforded no protection from the hot droplets of oil that stung Johnson's exposed flesh. Johnson remembered his life jacket at the base of the crow's nest. What if he needed it? The confined space of *Pamanset*'s crow's nest did not allow him to wear the life saving device. [33]

Aboard fleet tug *Munsee*, the penetrating staccato of the GQ horn, followed by the glaring lights, shook Store Keeper Second Class Simon "Sid" Harris out of his sleep. "All hands up," the gangway watch yelled as he ran through the crew's quarters. The twenty-seven-year-old storekeeper, still dazed by the GQ alarm as he dressed, remembered to roll his sleeves down for protection against flash burns. Harris headed on the double for his battle station on the tug's bridge. Harris alternated GQ stations with Yeoman Jim Brasher, operating the communications and relaying commands to and from Captain Pingley. Harris arrived and found the Yeoman already on the phones, so he was free for other assignments. *Munsee* had been riding at anchor two miles northeast of the burning *Mississinewa*. The tug proceeded at flank speed toward the column of rising black smoke. The crew readied



USS *Munsee* (ATF-107). The fleet tug's sailors distinguished themselves with heroic efforts to save *Mississinewa* on 20 November 1944. Photo courtesy of Sid Harris

the fire pumps, salvage pumps, and fire fighting gear as they steamed toward Mugai Channel.

Harris had a 35mm camera and had been appointed as the ship's photographer by Captain Pingley. The camera was seldom used except when the Captain had official visitors or functions.

"Can I photograph the action, sir?" inquired Harris as Pingley organized the fire fighters who would embark on the blazing oiler. "Okay, Stores. Break out the camera."¹⁴ "Sid" Harris was destined to take dramatic photographs over the next three hours. [34]

Sailors aboard cruiser *Santa Fe* (CL-60) hoisted a Kingfisher floatplane from the deck at 0525 in preparation for launching the plane of pilot Lieutenant (j.g.) Blase C. Zamucen. Daylight would come within minutes. Aviation Radioman Third Class Russell Evinrude was Zamucen's back seat passenger for their anti-submarine patrol above Ulithi in patrol zone II. The light cruiser went to Readiness III, sunrise phase condition, as the aircrew taxied out into open water and took off. The TBS radio crackled on the bridge of *Santa Fe* with the news of a periscope sighting only minutes after the Kingfisher took off. The floatplane had been in the air fifteen minutes when *Mississinewa* exploded. [35]



Simon "Sid" Harris, SK2c, USS *Munsee* (ATF-107), captured *Mississinewa* in her death throes on 20 November 1944 with thirty-seven dramatic photos he took with the Captain's permission. The original photos came home with Harris after the war and were not "discovered" until Harris responded to a VFW magazine classified ad run by Mike Mair in 1998. The dramatic photos taken by Harris have received world-wide acclaim since first being published in 2003. *Photo courtesy of Sid Harris*

Southeast of Ulithi, the Japanese submariners aboard *I-36* waited patiently for word about the success of Ensign Imanishi's *kaiten* launched earlier in the direction of Mas Island. Angry and in shame, Lieutenants Yoshimoto and Toyozumi crawled out of their disabled *kaiten* and re-entered their mother sub through the access tubes that connected the *kaiten* escape hatch with the hull. Both men were sobbing, bitterly disappointed that their *kaiten* had jammed in the "V" shaped wood cradles on deck. Kudo's *kaiten* was not fitted with the access tube and he remained in his *kaiten*. Lieutenant Commander Teramoto risked detection when he surfaced later, taking the equally disappointed Ensign Kudo back inside the boat.

Commander Teramoto dove *I-36* to periscope depth and ordered the sonar operator to listen for explosions. An explosion was recorded at 0545 and another at 0605. Both explosions appeared to come from south of Mog Mog Island. "Ensign Imanishi scored a hit." The excited crew quietly exchanged congratulations, but the celebration was short lived as Teramoto dove deep to escape the first of one hundred-plus depth charges that rained down on his submerged boat. The mood grew tense as the sound operator estimated the distance from the succession of exploding depth charges. None



Vought OS2U-1 "Kingfisher" floatplane flown by Lt. (j.g.) Blase Zamucen and Russell Evinrude, RM3c, from the light cruiser USS *Santa Fe* (CL-60). The pair rescued nearly twenty *Mississinewa* survivors from the oily waters of Ulithi lagoon by dragging them from the flames with rope secured to their taxiing floatplane, earning them the Navy Marine Corp Medal for Heroism. *Photo courtesy of US Navy*



USS *Mississinewa* (AO-59) disappears in a column of smoke as the stricken oiler is engulfed in a sea of flaming NSFO fuel and one-hundred octane aviation gasoline. *ComServRon Ten photo: Courtesy of George M. Stevens, USS Sepulga (AO-20)*

were close to *I-36*, but this was little consolation to the Japanese as the next round of depth charges could crush the fragile hull of their boat. [36]

Commodore W.R. Carter, Commander of Service Squadron Ten, directed rescue operations by voice radio from his office aboard destroyer tender *Prairie* (AD-15). Carter ordered *Munsee*, *Ontario*, *Turkey*, *Arapaho*, *Lipan*, *Extractor*, *Menominee*, *ATR-51*, *YTB-384*, *YTB-372*, and *YTB-376* to proceed at flank speed to render assistance and rescue *Mississinewa* survivors. An order was sent via TBS radio at 0555. The fire rooms and engine rooms

aboard every ship at Ulithi were frantically working up steam to evacuate the harbor if necessary. Oilers and station tankers close to the stricken *Mississinewa* began to weigh anchor as smoke, flame, and exploding ammunition threatened their ships. [4]

Commodore Carter, acting as senior officer present at Ulithi, was responsible for the safety of fleet units and vessels. The possibility of additional lurking midget submarines (the discovery of the new Japanese *kaiten* weapon was made later) inside Ulithi lagoon was uppermost in Carter's mind. US Navy destroyers and destroyer escorts weaved through the Third Fleet anchorage, dropping depth charges one at a time rather than in a pattern to avoid damaging ships' hulls. Sailors now on alert at Ulithi knew the burning *Mississinewa* was the result of enemy action. The Japanese had recognized the strategic value of Ulithi as an advance base and boldly attacked. [37]