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Ennis man's World War II memories honor lost comrades

Editor's Note: This is the conclusion of a two-part article spotlighting Ennis WWII veteran Fernando "Cookie" Cuevas' survival of the USS Mississinewa.

Author Mike Mair said while most crewmen were aware of the detonation of the kaiten warhead's 3,400 lbs of explosives, many more were not. He said it was in alerting those still asleep below that Cuevas went from cook to hero that day.

"He rushed to the crews' quarters a deck below and made his way through the compartment, waking sleeping sailors as the bunk rooms quickly filled with oily smoke. Cookie risked his own life below decks that horrific morning and saved many men who would otherwise have succumbed in their bunks."

To the Ennis Daily News, Cuevas was modest about this heroic act: "My quarters were just one flight below so I went down to wake up the others, then ran up to the fantail." There on the stern of the rapidly sinking ship, he surveyed the situation: "The smoke blocked out the sun and the water was on fire."

While deciding what to do, he said he helped "some guys over the rail, and pushed some over the rail who were scared and didn't know how to swim."

Looking around, he noticed there were no officers present.

"They must have all been forward where most of the burning oil in the water was," Cuevas ventured.

Standing nearby was Chief Frank Lutz who tried to keep a brave face, telling Cookie, "You've got plenty of time." Lutz couldn't convince Cuevas that sticking to the ship was such a good idea, and he decided to follow his shipmates into the water.

"I'm gone!" Cookie yelled back to Lutz as he dropped over the side.

Once in the water, he looked up and saw a man hanging from a rope, too scared to let go. "The crew kept yelling down to cut him from the rope," Cookie said, "and I tried but the guy finally let go."

Swimming away, dodging the flaming slabs of oil, he was approached by another swimmer. The man had no lifejacket and was having a hard time staying afloat. Cuevas recognized the other sailor —his last name was Martino, he remembered — and offered to share his lifejacket. The two drifted on their backs watching the Miss consumed by flames as it capsized, turning its propellers to the sky.

In a few hours, Cookie and Martino were taken onto a boat sent from the nearby Lackawanna (AO-40). The 26-foot motorboat came out of the smoky dark all of a sudden — or as Cuevas put it, "I damn near got the surprise of my life."

After being pulled to safety, the pair saw a grab-bag assortment of other crew from the Miss, including "one guy who was buck-ass naked," Cookie laughed, explaining he learned the man's clothes had caught fire and he had stripped before jumping overboard.

He expressed praise for the Lackawanna. "If it weren't for the AO-40, most of us wouldn't have made it," he said.

Cuevas said he was lucky to have been saved; some of his fellow cooks, off-shift when the hit came, died. One of them was a good friend: "His name was John Costello."

Others close to Cookie who didn't survive were Supply Officer Herbert Allen and Chief Lutz, whom he had last seen on the tilting stern, urging him to wait a little longer.

"We also lost Frenchie, our baker," Cuevas said. "He was a good baker, that Frenchie."

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For the time being, Cookie tried to put the disaster behind him. He returned home to New York aboard the USS Wichita for a 40-day leave before reporting for duty at San Pedro where he was based until his retirement from the Navy at the grand old age of 35 in 1946.

But the Miss never left his mind. "I used to dream about it," he said. "It used to wake me up in the night."

But when he started talking about it, remembering the brave men with whom he had served, the sinking no longer haunted him.

Rita Woody, his daughter, said he has never stopped talking about it.

"I remember hearing his stories all through my childhood," she said, adding that she is proud to see he's getting his day in the sun with the upcoming book by Mike Mair that includes many of her father's recollections.

Ennis has been home to Cuevas since his wife died in 1978. He remarried in 1981 to Helen Donnegan; she died seven years ago. But he has his family to build his life around, and an increasingly large one; Cookie is now a great-grandfather.

And the Miss is still with him, too. Through his association with Mair as well as friendships made at reunions of Miss survivors over the years, Cuevas is still part of the unfolding story of the lost ship.

The first Miss reunion in 1999, co-chaired by Mair, Ron Fullerman and Sarah Bright, led to Cookie's involvement with Mair's book.

Cuevas and his family attended the 2003 reunion, held in Rhode Island where the Miss crew had been trained some 60 years earlier.

"The reunions really offered the first interviews with survivors," Mair said, "helping me realize that an incredible story had been cloaked by silence for decades, and that our younger generation needs to understand what a major contribution was made by courageous people like Cookie Cuevas."

For the most part, Cuevas has enjoyed the celebrity that's come his way as a Miss survivor. He and his family helped fund the Miss historical monument at Ulithi, and on the island of Falalop his name is recorded on a memorial window at the Queen of Heaven Catholic Church, whose parishioners regard the Miss crew as their liberators. Church deacon John Rulmal wrote in a letter to Woody that though the Miss was "sunk by the enemy, your loved ones



wrote in a letter to everybody that though the Miss was sunk by the enemy, your loved ones won the victory in our hearts. As a result, today we are all free and Christians. The U.S. Navy chaplain converted all our parents and grandparents in 1944 and '45."

Cookie has also enjoyed meeting and making friends with descendants of former crewmembers, including the daughter of one shipmate who didn't survive. Jan Tracy was a baby when her father Robert L. Rowe died aboard the Miss. She knew nothing about his time aboard ship until she met Cookie, who had befriended her dad, and was able to fill her in about his life as a serviceman.

Cuevas has even gotten to know noted microbiologists Chip and Pam Lambert who led the expedition to locate the wreck of the Miss six years ago, and later assisted the Navy in its project to remove leaking oil from the sunken ship. Chip Lambert wrote the concluding chapters of Mair's forthcoming book, and supplied the undersea photos reproduced in it. The Lamberts, especially Pam, who recorded her conversations with Cuevas in her private journal, enjoyed meeting Cookie. Their talks were "very emotional and enlightening," the couple told the Ennis Daily News.

"It's time to honor men like Cookie Cuevas," Mair said. "As Americans, we must remember the 'Greatest Generation.' Their acts today would be of great valor but in 1944 were a common occurrence."

Cookie agrees.

"I'd like to see the men of the AO-59 honored," he said, and thanks to the remembrances he's shared with authors and documentarians his wish is coming to pass.

Cookie said he used to watch the flags of the old Miss raised and lowered in the setting sun — flags that have never ceased waving in his memory across the currents of time.

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