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An ocean of memories

Randy Bryan Bigham, *Reporter*
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WWII sinking survivor recounts experiences for upcoming book

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

Fernando "Cookie" Cuevas is a survivor. No, not a TV reality show contestant, the 95-year-old Ennis veteran of WWII is the real thing. Nearly 63 years ago he stood on the fantail of a sinking Navy tanker. Smoke filled the sky and the water below was full of patches of burning oil. Some of his shipmates hesitated to jump — though trained sailors, not all could swim. But Cookie wasn't worried. "I was always a swimmer," he told the Ennis Daily News in an exclusive interview last week. That ability and a little luck came in handy, and he remembers with uncanny detail the close call he averted.

"When something like that happens to you," Cuevas said, "it's something you never forget." Today, Cookie is one of the oldest living survivors of the disaster that struck the USS Mississinewa in the Western Pacific's Caroline Islands on the morning of Nov. 20, 1944, when a kaiten, a manned Japanese torpedo sub, rammed the auxiliary oiler while at dock at the U.S. Naval base in Ulithi Lagoon.

The kamikaze attack on the Miss, as the tanker was nicknamed, killed 63 crewmen. But thanks to the nearby USS Lackawanna and the USS Munsee, some 200 sailors were rescued. The story of the Miss went unheralded in the media for decades but in 2001 a team of divers discovered the wreck, and four years ago the Navy successfully offloaded residual leaking oil from the ship.

These efforts put the name of the sunken tanker back in the news, and TV documentaries about the ship have since appeared on the History and National Geographic channels. But it's the few remaining survivors of the Miss who have added the human element to the tale. Of these, Ennis' Cuevas may have the greatest recall.

Though more than half a century has passed, he can still remember the day he boarded the vessel that nearly claimed his life. He remembers the dangerous routine his ship undertook of refueling destroyers and other warships in mid-ocean.

"We were at sea all the time from sunup to sunset," Cuevas said.

And he remembers the ceremony of retiring ensigns and raising new ones. He even recalls using 5-watt light bulbs during blackouts at sea. There's very little he doesn't recall about the ship he served and survived, and he said he's glad of that. Cookie wants to share his memories so the men who were lost on the Miss won't be forgotten.

Wisconsin-based author and historian Mike Mair, whose father was a Miss survivor, also appreciates Cuevas' gift of memory. Mair's book *Oil, Fire and Fate*, recounting the story of the Miss, is due out next month, and Cuevas contributed many valuable reminiscences.

"My own father, John A. Mair, refused to speak of the tragedy," the writer said. "Cookie was one of the first survivors who vividly portrayed with his remarkable memory many of the events that unfolded. As I interviewed other survivors, his detailed recollections were cross-checked and confirmed."

To Mair, Cuevas isn't just a survivor, he's a hero.

"As explosions rocked the stricken vessel, Cookie displayed cool courage," Mair said. "He exemplifies the highest ideals of military service by American men and women."



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Service to his country wasn't what Cuevas had in mind in 1944 when at age 33 the married man was drafted into the Navy.

"Things were so bad they were even drafting old men," laughed Cookie's daughter, former Ennis City Commissioner Rita Woody, wife of Ellis County Justice of the Peace Bill Woody. Rita was barely a year old when her dad joined the Mississinewa, his first assignment after boot camp in Rhode Island.

As a family man, Cuevas had much to lose by going to war but he fulfilled his duty — and he did it with the special pride of one who was not an American by birth, yet whose story is all-American.

Born in Puerto Rico in 1911, Fernando "Cookie" Cuevas immigrated with his family at age 6, passing through legendary Ellis Island. The Cuevas' settled in New York where he wed Rita's mom Catherine in 1936 — and where he lived for over 50 years before exchanging the Bronx's Fairfield Ave. for Ennis' Hall St.

It was from the little house he lives in beside his daughter and son-in-law that the Ennis Daily News had the honor of meeting Cuevas. That he was a gentleman with the courtly manners of his generation was immediately clear. Though he'll soon celebrate his 96th birthday and now uses a walker, the World War II hero arose slowly from his chair to extend a firm hand to this reporter.

There wasn't much prodding Cookie to tell the story of the Mississinewa, the defining moment of his life as a sailor.

He said in the years just after the disaster he rarely discussed it but that since his daughter was old enough to remember and ask questions, he has tried to share the story. Maybe that's why his memories are so strong; he never let them go untold.

When Cuevas boarded the 550-foot long, 25,000-ton Miss (code named AO-59) in May 1944, the Navy tanker was brand new. One of a crew of 298, he served as a "ship to ship talker," facilitating the mid-ocean refueling of warships, as a gunner and as a volunteer cook.

"That's the only damn thing I ever volunteered to do for the Navy," Cuevas laughed, adding that when he realized he was going to serve on a tanker that would often put to sea without protection of an escort, he wasn't thrilled.

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ingered right then, it's not going to be an easy job, he said.

During refueling exercises, Cookie said the Miss didn't stop but just slowed down to between 5-8 knots. Usually there were two ships being refueled at once, one on each side of the Miss. "They'd shoot over the lines and then we'd screw 'em down," he said. "And the fuel went out 90 gallons a minute. That's where the danger came in. Sometimes a line would snap and kill the men. My job was to call down to the boiler room, 'Ready to receive.'"

All wasn't exactly routine. Cuevas said the Miss' first casualty happened well before the Japanese kaiten strike in the lagoon at Ulithi Atoll.

"The first guy to die was Dorsey," he said. "He was sent to the boson's locker to pull out a line, and a steam pipe burst overhead."

Daughter Rita clarified that "the steam engulfed Dorsey and he died as a result of his wounds."

In the days leading up to the catastrophe, after the Miss had docked in Ulithi in a crowded berth pattern the Navy generally disallowed, Cuevas said he went to a church service where the chaplain addressed the problem.

"We're breaking all the rules of the Navy," the chaplain said. "We're so close together, if we get hit, we're all dead."

Cookie said he received communion and absolution at the service.

It's ironic that the Miss' deathblow should come while harbored instead of at sea where she was most vulnerable.

Another stroke of odd fate was that the ship was assigned the wrong berth in Ulithi Lagoon. Had she been in her proper position, the Miss wouldn't have been struck or at least not fatally damaged.

The events of Nov. 20, 1944 were related by Cuevas with a reserve befitting the day he saw his friends die.

"It was a quarter to six in the morning," he said. "I was on duty in the kitchen with two other cooks making breakfast. As I went to check an oven, the torpedo hit. The next thing I knew I was on the floor. I didn't think it was a torpedo until the second hit. I put on my lifejacket. I had two, one I kept in my cabin, the other in the kitchen."

The conclusion of Cuevas' story will appear in tomorrow's issue of the Ennis Daily News.

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