



Spring 2000

Mr. Simon Harris

The final moments of the AO-59, captured forever.

All those who were able to attend last April's reunion in Corpus Christi were given the opportunity to finish a story. The end of our story was provided by Mr. Sid Harris.

Sid was looking through a "Veterans of Foreign Wars" publication and came across a familiar name. It was that of the U.S.S. Mississinewa along with a reunion notice. He contacted Mike Mair and said that although he did not serve aboard the AO-59 he did have something that would be of great interest to those who had.

Sid introduced himself to the reunion group, mentioning that he was from

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Simon "Sid" Harris

The Passing Of Two Of Our Crewmen



Al Bell, M1c ★



★ Bill Gimmeson, S2c



December of 1999 ended on a sad note for the crewmen of the U.S.S. Mississinewa and their families. It ended with the passing of William "Bill" Gimmeson S2c, and Alfred "Al" Bell, M1c. Bill died on December 5th and Al, just one week later, on December 12th. Both men had attended, with family members, the AO-59 reunion in Corpus Christi, TX, April of 1999.

(Continued on backcover)





dramatic photographs I have ever seen.

The 3rd and 5th fleet were occupying the Ulithi Lagoon on that November day. The U.S.S. Mississinewa, AO-59 was anchored at the entrance of the lagoon at Ulithi Atoll. At 5:45 a.m. it was hit forward on the starboard side by a Japanese "Kaiten" (a manned torpedo). The U.S.S. Munsee, ATF-107 sounded General Quarters at 5:50 a.m. The ATF-107 was anchored about 2 miles off the AO-59's starboard bow. By 6:20 a.m. they reached the Mississinewa as it was engulfed in a column of smoke and flames. A light drizzle of oil globules came down, covering everything the sailors touched as we approached the AO-59. Before the last flames were

Cherry Hill, New Jersey and 83 years old. He entered the Navy and after arriving in Hawaii aboard the aircraft carrier Intrepid, he was assigned to the U.S.S. Munsee, ATF-107. The ATF stands for Auxiliary Fleet Tug.

"I wonder, have you ever heard of Sea Dirt? One of my first lessons at sea was that you can get just as dirty out on the ocean as on land. I naively thought that out on the nice clean ocean things just didn't get dirty...not so. I call it SEA DIRT because every time I looked down on my uniform, I'd SEE dirt." After that opener, Sid proceeded to share with the group the photos that he took in the Ulithi Lagoon on November 20, 1944. Those photos were some of the most exciting and



extinguished Sid would take 37 photographs of the heroic effort to save the Mississinewa.

The Munsee was the first tug to reach the Mississinewa. Because of the dense smoke completely obstructing the port side of

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Photos Top to Bottom:

1. The pillar of flames and smoke extending out a hundred yards from the AO-59.
2. Coming in from port side, flames and smoke too dense. Difficult to see the ship.
3. Coming into starboard quarter.
4. Big explosion on bow of AO-59, port side. Flaming oil begins pouring around bow.



concentrate on fighting the fire on the AO-59.

The flames were brought under control on the stern of the AO-59 allowing the ATF-107 to back off and reposition the tug along side the burning tanker. After tying up to the AO-59, amid ship starboard side, three fire fighting teams from the Munsee boarded the AO-59 to fight the fires, both forward and down below decks.

Water was continuously poured on the tanker and especially on the various fuel drums that were on the deck. Captain John Pingley directed fire operations aboard the Munsee while

the AO-59, the Munsee was forced to come around the stern where the wind helped to reveal the burning ship. Drums of gasoline, machine oil, 20 mm ammunition along with shells from the 5" 38 gun were exploding. Suddenly, blazing oil came gushing around the bow of the tanker toward the ATF-107. The wind continued to blow the burning oil toward and then around the stern of the ATF-107. The other tugs backed away while the ATF-107 stayed against the AO-59 hull. After a moment the ATF-107 was trapped, surrounded by the flames, unable to see anything through the dense smoke. The other tugs which had backed away were now fighting the fire on the water behind them so that the ATF-107 could continue to



Lt. Gray was in charge of the crews that had boarded the Mississinewa.

The critical point in fighting the fire came when the Mississinewa began to settle from the combined effects of the torpedoing, fire and water being used to battle the fire. As the sea water reached

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Photos Top to Bottom:

1. The wind blowing blazing oil around the Munsee. Other tugs backing out to avoid not being surrounded.
2. Almost surrounded by flaming oil, the Munsee was cut off forward by the blazing ship.
3. A wall of flaming oil advancing on the ATF-107.
4. The heat is intense as the last tug backs out. Dense black smoke obliterates vision.



the deck of the Mississinewa the firefighters were still aboard winning the battle with the fires astern and amidship. The ship started to shudder and settle even more, signalling to the firefighters it was time to return to the Munsee. All the men returned unhurt, although one man did have to jump into the sea to escape the sinking Mississinewa and was pulled aboard the Munsee unhurt.

The Mississinewa slowly rolled over and slipped under the surface of the sea with only smoke showing where it had been peacefully anchored only hours before. The



Capt. Pingley received a commendation... "For outstanding performance of duty as Commanding officer of a United States Tugboat in fighting a fire aboard a United States Ship on 20 November 1944. Despite adverse conditions and terrific heat, he brought his ship alongside the burning vessel in an effort to fight the fire. He remained in this position, although surrounded by burning oil and in constant danger from exploding ammunition, until all hope of saving her was abandoned and she commenced to sink. His conduct was at all times in keeping with the highest traditions of the naval service."

C.W. Nimitz, Fleet Admiral, U.S. Navy

Munsee crew covered with soot, salt spray and oil could only stand there in complete frustration watching the burning sea. The Munsee crew extinguished the remaining oil still ablaze on the water, ending the last traces of the U.S.S. Mississinewa, AO-59. Sid Harris' dynamic photographs will help to keep alive the memory of the heroic effort to save the Mississinewa by that of the Munsee and the other crews.

Sid ended the evening..."By the way...James Cameron used those last few photos as a reference for the sinking scene when directing the motion picture 'Titanic'... just kidding!" That ended the story of the U.S.S. Mississinewa, AO-59's final moments.

-Bob Fulleman



Photos Top to Bottom:

1. The Munsee becomes surrounded by the burning oil on top of the water.
2. ATF-107, bow on to the AO-59, continues battling the flames on board the AO-59 while other tugs fight flames on the floating oil surrounding the ATF-107.
3. Maneuvering to come amidships to fight the fire forward where it is more intense.

The Mississinewa begins settling by the bow at the same time 3 fire fighting crews from the Munsee are still aboard fighting the fires amidship.



Photos Top to Bottom:
1. Commanding Officer ATF-107, Captain John Pingley, directing play of water as oil flares up.
2. The Mississinewa starting to settle from the cumulative effects of explosions and tons of water.
3. Off the bow, the deck and bulkhead blown out by explosion of a 5" 38 magazine.

Next Issue:

Our next issue will include photos taken at the memorial service held at Ulithi Atoll, January, 2000, for the U.S.S. Mississinewa.





U.S.S. Mississinewa, AO-59's ...Final Moments

Photographs by Sid Harris

We can not thank Mr. Sid Harris enough for not only being a member of the brave crew who risked their lives to save the U.S.S. Mississinewa but also for his effort to preserve an everlasting reminder of what obstacles our service men faced in the battle for the freedom we all enjoy today.

Special Notes:

BJ Mair has put together a set of video tapes with crew members' interviews. Please contact Mike for a free copy. Phone: 1 (800) 236-4327

All of Mr. Harris' photographs will be available to view on the internet within the next few weeks at <http://www.usmississinewa.homepage.com>.

Crew News:

We want to extend our sympathies, prayers and support to Fernando Cuevas, S2c and his family on the loss of his wife, Madene. She passed away on February 11th and was buried on Sunday the 13th.

AO-59

An excerpt from Capt. John F. Pingley's report filed to the Fleet Commander in regard to the fire fighting effort to save the U.S.S. Mississinewa, AO-59 dated 20, November 1944.

U.S.S. MUNSEE (ATF-107)

20 November 1944 - Ulithi Atoll.

At 0545 the quartermaster on watch called me and reported a fire on board a tanker in the vicinity of Berth 131. Operations to get underway were made. On the approach to the tanker which was identified as the U.S.S. MISSISSINEWA (AO-59). That vessel appeared to be enveloped in flames. On closer approach this ship commenced to cover with fuel oil descending from large billows of smoke. Fire pumps and hose was made ready on the run down, a distance of approximately two miles. Maneuvered to get alongside the tanker's starboard quarter. Several explosions were observed, one, surmised to be a magazine on the starboard side aft, several pieces of metal dropped close aboard. The heat alongside was terrific and clouds of heavy black smoke which enveloped this ship erected a disagreeable situation. Ship's ventilation system was secured while alongside. Though it was reported that the tanker was settling by the bow, it was assured that the tanker would continue to float and preparations were made to board her with foam and foam generators and chemical extinguishes, draft standings on the tanker were reported to me at regular intervals as the fire was being fought and gradually being brought under control. The men on board the tanker were ordered off as she started going down fast. The stern was high and propellers well clear of the water when it was observed that she was going to capsize. All but one man were off, both of those jumped clear and were picked up later without injury. Fog nozzles were used on all hose, solid stream and spray used with good effect. The fire was brought under control but the ship was a total loss. No survivors where picked up by this vessel. It is doubted if a living person was on board the tanker when this ship went alongside. Crew's space aft was a raging inferno, though this space was brought under control no signs of living persons existed.



This photograph shows the U.S.S. Munsee, ATF-107, in an Advance Base Sectional Drydock (ABSD) at Guam for repairs in July 1945.

An excerpt from the report of Lt. Gary, Fire Consultant Officer, filed in regard to the fire fighting effort to save the U.S.S. Mississinewa, AO-59.

From: Fire Consultant Officer,
Staff of Commander Battleships, U.S. Pacific Fleet.
To: Commander Battleships, U.S. Pacific Fleet.
Subject: U.S.S. MISSISSINEWA, (AO-59) - Fire Fighting Operations
On Board

20 November 1944 - Ulithi Atoll.

1. At approximately 0545, 20 November 1944, the oiler MISSISSINEWA (AO-59), anchored in Berth 131 opposite Mugai Channel entrance, Ulithi Lagoon, was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine. An explosion and fire followed.

2. In accordance with your instructions I reported to Commodore O.O. KESSING, U.S.N., Atoll Commander, Ulithi Islands, at the scene of the fire and offered my services in connection with the fire fighting operations. He instructed me to further report to the commanding officer of that fleet tug which in my opinion was in the most effective position for fire fighting. I reported accordingly to Lieutenant J.A. YOUNG, Jr., U.S.N.R., Commanding Officer of the MENOMINEE (ATF-73), who was close aboard the burning tanker and directing well placed streams on the fire. Lieutenant (jg) O.R. COFFIN, U.S.N.R., Fire Fighting Officer for the MENOMINEE, had all available streams in operation and the full fire fighting facilities of the tug effectively organized. Upon consultation, we decided that the proper technique in fighting the fire called for heavy streams from the fleet tugs directed on the tanker to drive the fire forward and permit hose lines to be placed on board the tanker from the stern to extinguish the fire.

3. I then left the MENOMINEE and reported to Lieutenant Commander John F. PINGLEY, U.S.N. Commanding Officer of the U.S.S. MUNSEE (ATF-107), whose ship was close aboard the stern of the MISSISSINEWA, Inasmuch as his fire fighting officer and fire fighting personnel had been transferred a short time before, he accepted my offer to direct his fire fighting organization.

4. A shift in the wind had forced the MENOMINEE and the AT-51 to retire from their positions close to the starboard side of the burning tanker, leaving the MUNSEE the only tug near enough to the tanker to place men and fire fighting equipment on board to fight the fire at close quarters. The following ships were observed to be directing large steams on the burning oil surrounding the torpedoed ship, with some of the turret streams from the fleet tugs reaching the tanker:

U.S.S. EXTRACTOR (ARS-15)
U.S.S. ARAPAHO (ATF-68)
U.S.S. MENOMINEE (ATF-73)
U.S.S. LIPAN (ATF-85)
U.S.S. MUNSEE (ATF-107)
ATR-51
YO-76
YO-88
YTB-385

5. The Commanding Officer of the MUNSEE and I agreed that though the MISSISSINEWA appeared to be settling by the bow, there was a good chance to save the ship if the fire could be extinguished and salvage pumps placed on board. Accordingly, with skillful seamanship, Lieutenant Commander PINGLEY placed his ship alongside the stern of the MISSISSINEWA and preparations were made to go on board. The fire had been driven from the after portion of the ship and all available streams were utilized to cool down the decks and superstructure.

6. As soon as possible I went on board to determine if it were practicable to conduct fire fighting operations from the main deck of the tanker. I made my way forward on the starboard side to the ladder landing to the superstructure deck and bridge and observed the progress of the fire. At that point the deck was awash with about six inches of water. The entire forward part of the ship and superstructure was afire and burning oil extended from the ship forward and abeam for a distance of approximately 100 yards. Parts of the ship aft of this point were afire but not to such a degree that fire fighting operations would be unduly dangerous. Meanwhile all the ships listed herein were directing hose and turret streams on the ship and on to the oil burning on the surface of the water. The Commanding Officer of the MUNSEE agreed with my suggestion that we place men aboard the tanker and attempt to extinguish the fire aft and drive the fire forward away from that part of the ship remaining above water in order that salvage operations could be commenced as soon as practicable.

7. With Lieutenant (jg) Mark MAURER, U.S.N.R., Executive Officer of the MUNSEE and Chief Boatswain John E. DEJA, U.S.N.R., three fire fighting parties were organized and three 2 1/2" hose lines led on to the MISSISSINEWA. The 2 1/2" All-purpose Navy fog nozzles were effectively used in extinguishing the fires in the after portion of the ship and gradually we were able to group lines athwartships and knock the fire forward and away from the tanker by using straight streams with a calculated 75-lb. nozzle pressure. In this manner the fire was extinguished or driven completely away from that part of the ship remaining afloat, leaving only the oil on the surface of the water away from the ship on fire.

8. At the time of boarding the MISSISSINEWA, the starboard side forward to the bridge was free of fire. Oil was burning on the main deck port side, compartments aft on the poop deck were afire and 20mm ammunition was burning and exploding in the port ammunition stowage and clipping room on the main deck amidships. This ammunition continued to be a hazard to fire fighting operations. The port side was burning and oil was afire on the water along the port side forward of the poop deck. The port clipping room was engulfed in flames. The first hose line aboard attached the fire at this point and the coolness with which the enlisted personnel beat back the flames with their fog nozzle and flooded the clipping room was noteworthy.

9. To extinguish the fire, heavy streams were used to wash the oil off the ship into the water. There the many streams from the surrounding tugs were able to cool down and smother the fire. Where the fire was confined to compartments, fog nozzles were effective. Foam was not used at any time due to the large area over which the fire burned and the impossibility of building a blanket of foam over the burning oil.

10. During the fire fighting operations, the ship appeared to be settling by the bow and it was with much concern that we observed the deepening water on the main deck of the tanker. At the furthest point forward at which fire fighting operations were conducted we were working in water that surged from our knees to our hips.

11. At about 0815 the fire was completely extinguished from that portion of the tanker remaining afloat and I directed that all hose lines be secured and the men and equipment withdrawn to the MUNSEE. The Commanding Officer of the MUNSEE during all of those operations was carefully checking the rise of the stern of the MISSISSINEWA and at about 0820 ordered all fire fighters off of the sinking ship. We were able to salvage all hose lines except one when the stern rose alarmingly and it was apparent that the ship was soon to sink. The two men left with me on board the MISSISSINEWA and I jumped for the MUNSEE as the tanker started to roll. One man missed the tug and fell into the water but was pulled safely on board so the Captain rang up two thirds ahead and we cut loose our mooring lines. The tanker rolled and settled with only the propeller and rudder above water at 0825.

12. In conclusion I should like to state that the tanker appeared to be lost through progressive flooding. No one was injured from the MUNSEE and the only equipment lost was one 2 1/2" line of hose and fog nozzle. It was only through the exceptional bravery and skill of Lieutenant (jg) Mark MAURER, U.S.N.R., Chief Boatswain John E. DEJA, U.S.N.R., and the enlisted men listed in enclosure (A) that the fire fighting operation was a success. The seamanship exhibited by Lieutenant Commander PINGLEY, Commanding Officer of the MUNSEE, was exceptional and his cooperation in offering all of his equipment and men for the fire fighting operation was deeply appreciated. Without the fine work done by other ships listed herein, it would have been impossible for the fire fighting personnel of the MUNSEE to board the MISSISSINEWA. Though the ship was apparently lost by progressive flooding, the success in extinguishing the fire was a tribute to the new Navy fire fighting equipment and the technique exhibited by the personnel trained in the Navy fire fighting schools.

D.S. GRAY

William Gimmeson
December 22, 1924 - December 5, 1999

Alfred Bell
June 13, 1917 - December 12, 1999

Bill Gimmeson left Powell High School in Powell, Wyoming 3 weeks prior to Graduation, entering the Navy in January, 1944. Gimmeson completed Boot Camp at Farragut, Idaho in April, 1944. October 23, 1944 found Gimmeson and 12 other sailors transferred aboard the USS Mississinewa AO-59 at Ulithi after arriving aboard a troop transport from the States. Gimmeson was a deckhand with the 1st Division serving as the "phone man" communicating to the ships fueling on the port side at the forward AV gas station. Bill explained at the AO-59 reunion that he became an expert at scraping paint when the AO-59 was not fueling ships at sea! Gimmeson received a Purple Heart for burns sustained when the USS Mississinewa was lost on November 20, 1944. Gimmeson farmed with his wife Johanna and their 3 sons until retiring from farming in 1989.

Al Bell joined the Navy in January, 1941 for a 6 year enlistment. Boot camp was in Norfolk, VA. Al went to sea aboard the carrier USS Wasp CV-7 in April, 1941. The Wasp served until early 1942 in the Atlantic and then headed for the Pacific, crossing the equator where Bell became a Shellback on July 10, 1942. Bell earned Fireman 1c rating and Metalsmith 2c while aboard the Wasp. Bell abandoned ship with sailors from the Wasp after 3 Japanese torpedoes slammed into the Wasp from the Japanese submarine I-19 sinking the carrier on September 15, 1942. Bell returned to the States and served shore duty for one year at Naval Training Center, Sampson, New York. Bell was assigned to Newport, Rhode Island pre-commissioning detail in the spring of 1944. Bell returned from the Pacific with the survivors of the USS Mississinewa AO-59 in December 1944 (without his Harley Davidson motorcycle) and married his wife Hilda during his 30 day survivors leave. Bell served at San Diego until war's end. Recalled into the navy in 1951, Bell served aboard the USS Minos AR-14 based in Little Creek, VA. Bell served a total of 11 years in the Navy.

Suggestions for future newsletters!

Please send them to:
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e-mail: azfull@usa.net

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U.S.S. MISSISSINEWA
AO-59

May 18, 1944 — November 20, 1944