

Spike

by Don Branson

January 7, 2006

A Surprise Answer

A few years back my parents met a new couple, the Moldanes. The four of them were having “dinner out” one evening. It might have been the second or third time they had been out together, and it happened to be December 7th. During the course of the meal, Dad commented, “Well, I guess each of us can remember where he was on this day in 1941.” Spike's response was something to the effect, “Sure, I remember. We were on the USS *Blue* trying to get the door to the armory open, so that we could get ammunition to shoot back. All of the officers were on shore and had the keys, so we couldn't just open the door. We finally found a man with a personal weapon, and he was able to shoot the lock so that we could get in.”

He went on to say that they were able to get the door open, and make a stand. They were steamed out of Pearl Harbor before the bombers had sunk enough ships to seal the entrance. Once outside, they detected a “mini-sub,” and attacked it with depth charges. Despite causing enough damage to bring oil and debris to the surface, they did not get credit for the kill. In Spike's words, “you practically had to have the submarine skipper's hat” to receive the acknowledgment that came with such a difficult feat. They survived that day, and went on to participate in some of the best-known battles of World War Two.

A Naïve Comment

The grainy black-and-white films of World War One's combat in the muddy trenches of Europe haunted Milton “Spike” Moldane¹ and his friends as World War Two loomed. Images of young men fighting, dying in the rain and mud, and following orders from generals fifty miles behind the lines dominated their mental images of these film. He and his friends decided that trench warfare was to be avoided, so when World War Two began and it became obvious that their participation was inevitable, they enlisted in the Navy. In the Navy, they reasoned, a sailor lives on a ship, and the Admiral is close at hand, either on your ship or a nearby ship in an task force. One of the group of friends tried to enroll in another branch, but learned to his great distress that he was color-blind and could not serve in any branch.

In 1939 Spike entered midshipman's training. They were “ninety-day wonders”; ninety days was all it took to train them and prepare them to fight to save the people of the United States and Europe. For these ninety days they cruised on a battleship where they swabbed decks, attended classes, and practiced firing the ship's guns. Spike graduated as an ensign, and that is how he came to be on the Destroyer USS *Blue* at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Spike's job was as a gunner on the .50 caliber forward cannons. As he says, these guns “couldn't hit a barn.” Even with the aid of tracers, it was counted as luck to hit their targets, typically kamikaze planes on approach. The ship had other weapons, however: guns with barrels of five inches diameter and thirty-eight inches in length. These were good guns, being accurate enough to hit where they were aimed.

1 In the official records, he is often listed as “Ensign M.I. MOLDAFSKY, U.S.N.R.”

As war inched closer, the Japanese ambassador to the United States met with his American counterpart, but the Japanese flotilla was already at sea, making way for Hawaii. The *Blue* and its fighting group was ordered to sea for exercises. They used the big guns as well as the .50 caliber guns. They practiced with depth charges, submarines, and even a plane that towed a “sleeve” for target practice. One week before Sunday, December 7, 1941, the fleet was given orders to return to Pearl Harbor before exercises were complete, and this was an unusual event.

A few days before the historic day of December 7, 1941, Spike and a fellow ensign leaned on the rail of the *Blue*, reveling in the glory of the collected might of the United States Navy. “Look at all these ships,” Spike remembered saying, “Battleships, cruisers, carriers, destroyers. No one would ever *dare* attack us.” Ah, but they did dare.

War Begins

On Saturday the 6th, all of the senior and executive officers went on shore in Honolulu, where most had homes. At eight in the morning Sunday, Spike was eating breakfast when an academy officer in temporary command of the ship received a signal that Japanese planes had bombed four islands, and that they were to get underway, leaving the harbor immediately. When “battle stations” went up and Spike went to his post, he immediately laid eyes on the Battleship Arizona going up in smoke, and the smoke “went up forever.”²

The Japanese planes were coming in low, perhaps fifty feet over the sea. All of the *Blue's* guns were firing, and one of the five-inch guns destroyed an enemy plane. It was amazing to them to see that the five-inch gun was the one to take out the plane, and the gunners gathered together and started shaking hands.

The *Blue* was tied to a buoy, and had to be untied in order to leave the harbor. Planes were bombing battleships, dropping torpedoes, and some high-altitude planes were dropping bombs. The *Utah* was filled with logs (for target practice) and capsized when hit, dumping its logs into the harbor. The USS *Wright*, a P.T. Tender for servicing seagoing planes, was there, and a plane crashed into it.

The *Blue* steamed out of the harbor and assumed an anti-sub patrol outside of the harbor. Other ships were on the way out, while the planes continued their bombing. The USS *St. Louis* was leaving the harbor when there was a large explosion. It had to be a submarine's torpedo, as there were no planes bombing nearby. The harbor entrance was dredged to the sides to clear a channel for easy passage for ships. They figured a sub had fired a torpedo that had hit some of the debris. So the *Blue* dropped depth charges near the location of an echo shown by their sonar. Soon, an explosion was seen that was larger than what a depth charge might make, a sure sign of a sub. A large black slick went out from the explosion - one more indication that they had scored a direct hit on one of the mini-sub commonly used by the Japanese. But “without the skipper’s hat” no award would be given for a submarine kill. They did, however, receive credit for about four plane kills.

After that, they spent time running “miscellaneous errands.” On one occasion, they received a message that a Japanese fleet was offshore of Barber's Point, Oahu, and they were to join other ships, some from the harbor, some that had been on exercise, and intercept the Japanese. It was a ruse, however, and they found no attacking fleet there.

2 You can see the official report from the *Blue* online at <http://www.history.navy.mil/docs/wwii/pearl/ph25.htm> and a full summary of December 7, 1941 at <http://www.history.navy.mil/docs/wwii/pearl/CinCPac.htm>.

On another occasion, they joined a carrier to assault Marshal Island. An enemy plane crashed onto one of the carriers there, and there was a great deal of damage caused. The *Blue* had only minor damage and was able to return. Another time, they escorted a convoy to the mainland. Once back at Pearl Harbor, they were ordered to Australia.

In Australia, they joined with other ships and went north from Sydney to Guadalcanal. Their job there was to provide cover for Marines on Tulaga. The next night they were attacked by destroyers and cruisers at the Battle of Savo Island. The U. S. fleet had two ships with radar, and the Japanese had only “long, long binoculars.”

On August 9, 1942 the Japanese hit the USS *Chicago* and another cruiser, Australia's HMAS *Canberra*, so the *Blue* and another destroyer were ordered to go alongside of the *Canberra*, which was “burning like Hades.” There were many, many, wounded on the *Canberra*, and they took them off first. The wounded were transferred to facilities for treatment.

The *Blue* went on to New Caledonia, Australia, to escort supplies to Guadalcanal. When they arrived at Guadalcanal, there were rumors of a Japanese carrier, and they had to leave before completely unloading the supplies. Upon their return, they received a message that patrol boats were stationed near Guadalcanal.

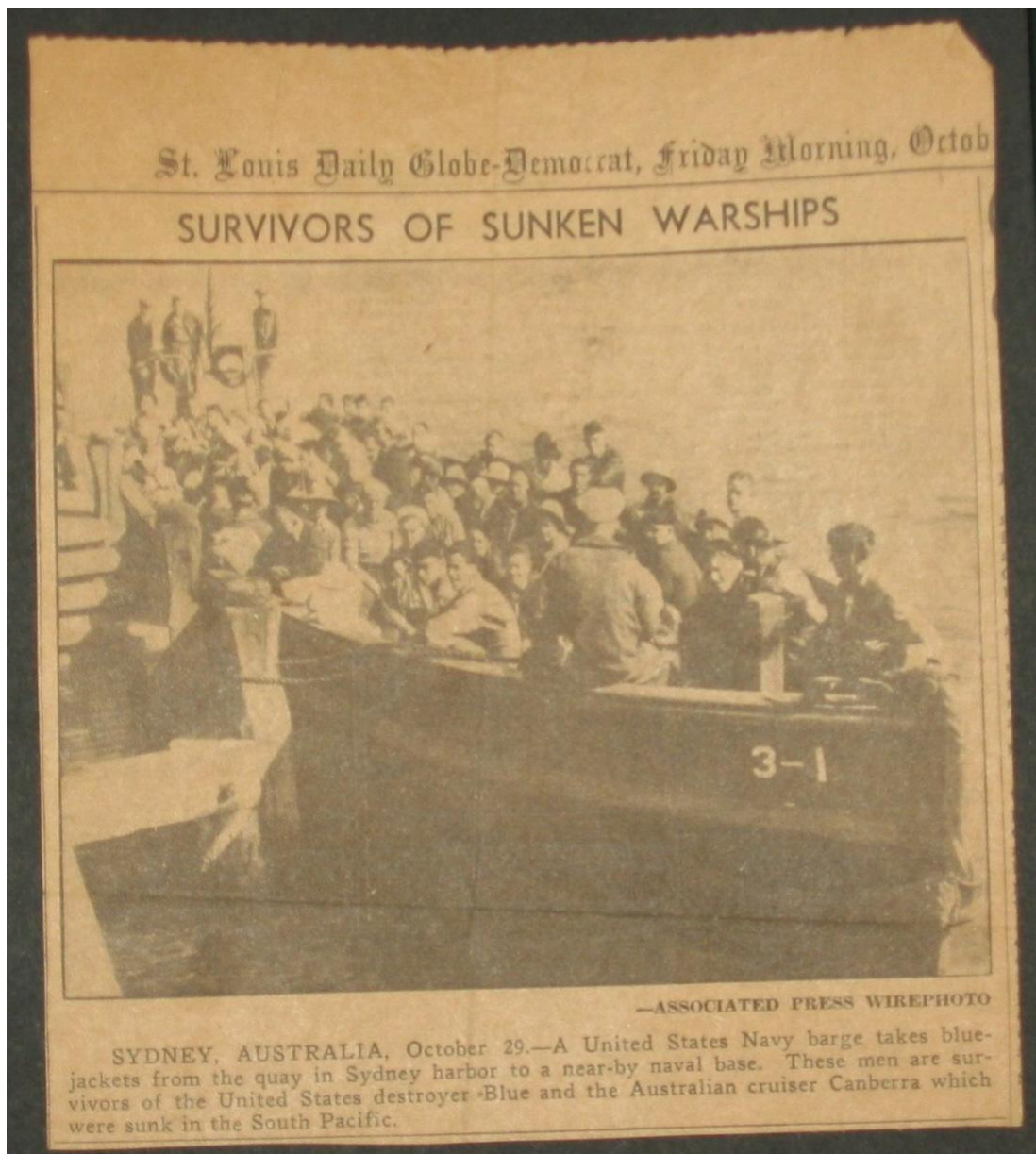
The Wrong Answer

Sometimes, seemingly trivial events change history. It was nighttime on the morning of August 22, 1942, and the sonar man detected the sound of high-speed propellers. The captain of the *Blue* decided to fire star shells to back-light the ships because they had to know – are they Japanese or U.S. ships? Once back-lit it would be easy to make a determination. The Japanese ships had a low profile and U.S. ships had a much taller profile. But the Division Commander countermanded that order, certain that they were U.S. ships. As soon as the radio communication with the commander ended, the crew could see two torpedo trails in the water. The torpedoes from the Japanese destroyer *Kawakaze* hit hard on the *Blue*'s stern.

To understand the gravity of this particular torpedo strike, it helps to know that in the *Blue*'s hold were about thirty to thirty-five depth charges. Depth charges were barrels roughly fifty-five gallons in size, and filled with black powder. In other words, if these were ignited, the blast would be sufficient to pulverize the whole of the *Blue*, most likely resulting in the loss of every single crew member. The stern was compartmentalized, and one torpedo exploded in a nearby compartment – one more compartment over, and it would have detonated the depth charges. Even though it did not ignite the charges, the torpedo strike was still sufficient to severely damage the *Blue*, killing about ten men near the explosion, disabling the propeller, and toppling the superstructure into the sea, though it remained attached.

They made the ship watertight, but it was not possible to tow it, even with two ships pulling. Another destroyer helped to evacuate everyone from the *Blue*, and it was scuttled there at Ironbottom Sound.

Back home, Spike's father had heard the news of the *Blue*'s sinking, and attempted to learn of his fate. He finally contacted Senator Truman, told the senator that his son was on the *Blue*, and but couldn't determine his status. A series of communications resulted in a shortwave message being sent to the ship. Spike had to let his family know by means of a postcard that he was alive and well.



Survivors.

A Party

After this, Spike and his fellow crew members were assigned to a new mission: to go to New Caledonia to aid in the building of an airstrip. The airstrips were constructed of a metal mesh laid out directly on the ground. Their assignment was to carry the mesh that would be used for construction from the ship to shore, all through the day and all through the night.

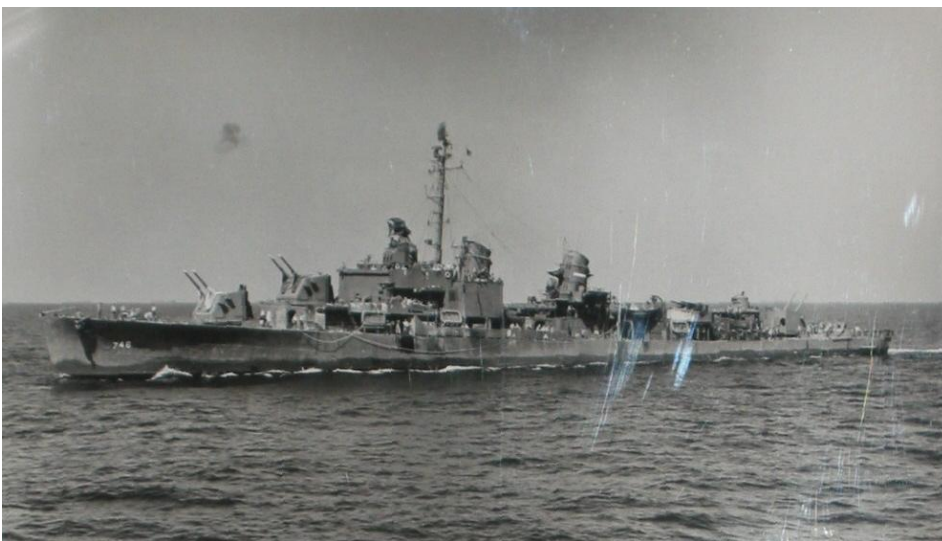
Their next orders were to board a British merchant cruiser that was carrying heavy guns and cargo to Australia. While underway to Australia, the ship made a stop in New Zealand. When the townspeople discovered that the crew from the *Blue* was on board, the same ship that came to rescue of Australia/New Zealand's ship the *Canberra*, they showered them with gifts in the form of replacement clothing for what was lost when the *Blue* was torpedoed. But the grand reception didn't stop there. The townspeople threw a huge banquet, a dance, and an Admiral came to shake everyone's hand, thanking each one for rescuing the crew of the *Canberra*.

While working in Australia, Spike received two items, the first being a safe for his office. The safe was quite heavy, but two men of slight stature were able to move it into place with the clever approach of rolling it on one-inch pipes across the floor. Spike remembered how they had done this, and applied it when a freezer was later delivered. The freezer was so heavy that it caused a ship to lean to the side in the process of moving it towards the dock. It was so heavy that several men could not move it with ropes. In lieu of pipes, tree limbs served to allow the freezer to be rolled into place.

Return To Destroyer Duty

Soon after, Spike was assigned to the Australian ship the *Bisborne*, as part of a mine-laying outfit. Following that, he was transferred to duty on a P.T. (Patrol Torpedo) boat in New Guinea. The Japanese sailed down the New Guinea coast in P.T. boats to keep new guns from coming to the airport in New Guinea. It was the job of our P.T. boats to clear the way, so the guns could arrive safely.

Spike found these odd jobs monotonous, and requested to be returned to destroyer duty, at which point he was assigned to the USS *Taussig*, a ship named after Rear Admiral Edward D. Taussig of St. Louis, Missouri. The *Taussig* was newly commissioned as of May 20, 1944, and Spike found this assignment to be a “positive improvement” over the drudgery of the previous months. He joined the crew at Staten Island as a torpedo officer and ship’s secretary. The *Taussig* sailed to Bermuda, through the Panama Canal, to Pearl Harbor, and joined with a “Fast Carrier Task Force” lead by Admirals Halsey, Michener, and Spruance, which sailed to Iwo Jima.



The USS Taussig - DD-746.

The light guns on the *Taussig* were much improved over what was available on the *Blue*. In fact, two different guns were used. Instead of the unreliable .50 caliber guns available on the *Blue*, the *Taussig* was equipped with 40mm guns for long range, perhaps as much as a mile, and 20mm for up-close work.

A destroyer, the USS *Pickett*, was sent ahead to catch Kamikazes and alert the task force. The *Taussig* was assigned to “picket duty,” during which they were able to bring down two Japanese bombers at night. Since it was dark, they had to rely on using only radar because the planes were otherwise invisible. Two more were brought down in the light of day. The gunners received special kudos for their success. The Admiral, using the *Taussig*'s radio handle, exclaimed, “Terrific, you are terrific!” Carriers in the group downed another three Kamikazes.

U.S.S. TAUSSIG (DD746)

Messages of congratulations to this command for "splashing" two "Zekes" during daylight, and two unidentified enemy planes at night, and for assisting aircraft "splash" one "Oscar" and one "Frances" during period 15 - 16 April 1945, off Amami Gunto.

From: Task Force Commander - "Well Done."

From: Task Group Commander - "Well Done, Good Work."

From: The Commander of a carrier division - "Well Done, Some more of your fine work."

From: The Commander of a cruiser division - "Congratulations on your beautiful shooting. We would be in Tokyo now if all ships could equal your record, you make with such exactness, ease and dispatch. When they fly over the TAUSSIG they make a quick trip to their ancestors."

/s/ A Rear Admiral

From: The Commanding Officer of a battleship - On behalf of the officers and crew I congratulate the officers and men of the TAUSSIG for their excellent work the past few days. Although battleships are supposed to protect the carriers, it seems as though the destroyers protect the battleships.

A Captain

From: The Commanding Officer of a battleship - We appreciate your work of the other night. It enabled us to get turned in early.

A Captain

From: The Commanding Officer of an aircraft carrier - "Our officers and crew are very proud of the brilliant work of you and your crew for the past few days."

/s/ A Captain

From: The Squadron Commander, "Your magnificent job is an inspiration to all hands."

From: The Division Commander - "My sincere congratulations to you and your ship for your outstanding performances yesterday in polishing off Nips. How many went down by fright when they found out TAUSSIG was on station?"

From: A cruiser - "We will trade you fifteen gallons of ice cream for secret of your success in shooting down Japs at night. Standby to receive ice cream which we are trading for your secret."

From: A Destroyer in our division - "Heartiest congratulations on your 'Fire Bug Day' yesterday. It's a terrific record."

From: A destroyer in our squadron - "Congratulations on your excellent shooting."

From: A destroyer in our squadron - Hearty congratulations to officers and crew for your superb gunnery performance.

From: A Destroyer in company - "Tighty fine shooting last night."

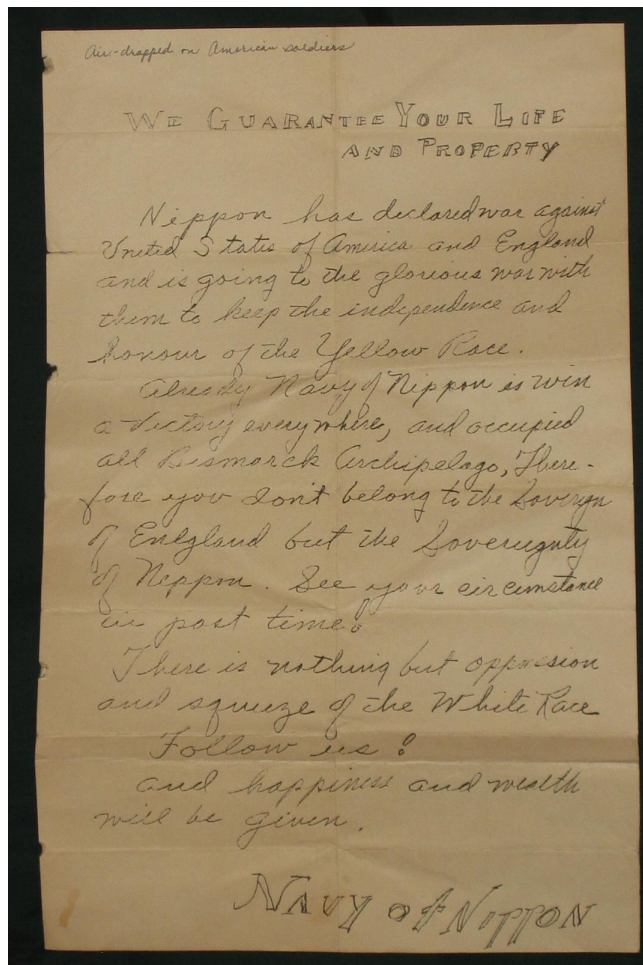
From: A destroyer in company - "Congratulations on your one ship task group."

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Kudos!

One morning with the task force, one of the force's planes was hit over Tokyo. The pilot said he was going to parachute and soon after the pilot's parachute was spotted. The *Taussig's* captain was gung-ho, saying "We'll get him!" The wind caught the pilot's parachute and dragged him through water, nearly drowning him in the process. Finally, the destroyer got ahead of the pilot. When they at last were able to pull the pilot aboard, he was as blue as ink. The ship's doctor, Dr. Blankenship, soon had the pilot healthy and pink once again.

Our pilots always flew in pairs - each plane watching the other, making sure they got through okay. Spike said "these guys were great - they won the war for us. They were in harm's way every day." One of the saddest things he witnessed was when one plane of a pair crashed on an island during an attack, and the plane's pair-buddy circled for long time, only to learn that his friend had not survived.



The enemy employed every means in attempting to win the war.

He Died of His Injuries

Sometime in 1945, while on this picket duty, the *Taussig's* five-inch gun brought down a Kamikaze plane, but only after it had approached very close to the ship. The pilot was pulled from the water, examined by the ship's doctor, and was found to have only minor burns on his face. Otherwise, he was in fine health. The *Taussig* radioed the carrier ship where the admiral in charge of the task force was on board. They were instructed to deliver the pilot to the carrier, to transfer him "immediately." Using a rope strung between the ships, the pilot strapped to a stretcher with wheels on it, they were able to deliver him to the carrier.

Some days later, the *Taussig* radioed the carrier to learn the pilot's fate. They were told that he "died of his injuries." He hadn't had any such threatening injuries. They drew the obvious conclusion that the pilot died during torture. But roughly forty years later, another chapter of this story was revealed. The doctor from the *Taussig* had the opportunity to talk to the pilot, who hadn't died after all.

As a Kamikaze trainee, the pilot had received one week's flight training, which included no actual flight time, and no instructions regarding landing the plane. Flight time would have consumed scarce airplane fuel. Training on the landing procedure was an unnecessary waste of time, for obvious reasons.

The plan for the captured pilot was to use him as part of an exchange for captured Americans. The pilot balked, knowing he would be executed on his returned, and his family shamed forever. Instead, they arranged a new name for the pilot, and sent him to the United States. When the *Taussig's* former doctor was able to speak to the ex-pilot, forty years later, the man who was once a pilot had become a cook in a New York restaurant.



The pilot's flight suit protected most of his body against burns. Spike is on the far left, in glasses and cap.

The Lone Bomber

After transferring the pilot the *Taussig's* task force received new orders: Sail to Japan to participate in a land invasion to overthrow Japan by sheer force. The Japanese were known to be fierce in battle. No worse news was possible. Some expected a million casualties. They might just as well have received a doctor's news of some agonizing ailment, without any hope whatsoever that it might be treatable. They steamed towards Japan. All crew members were instructed to review their wills to make certain that everything was in order.

Although they had been at war for years, there were often times to enjoy some camaraderie and revelry. There was none of that now. All of the crew members received the news as a death sentence, and never expected to see their homes or families again.

