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Uncle Myron's Wasp Story

LITERARY ARTS: LIFE EXPERIENCES
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HENDERSON COUNTY | Four Seasons Senior Games



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“In 1942, a volley of torpedoes sent the U.S.S. Wasp to the bottom of the Pacific. For decades, the families of the dead wondered where in the lightless depths of the ocean the ship could possibly be. Earlier this year, a team of wreck hunters set out to find it.” (The Epic Hunt for a Lost World War II Aircraft Carrier)

What danger could befall a restless twenty-year-old country boy who enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1938? No U.S. war, no problems, right? My Uncle Myron played trumpet in the Navy band for three uneventful years. Then fate stepped in and changed his destiny, one step at a time. A week before his tour of duty was scheduled to end, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the United States declared war on Japan. Suddenly the United States was involved in World War II.

If war had not broken out, my uncle would have been discharged from the Navy on December 13, 1941. He probably would have returned to his upstate New York farming community. Instead, with patriotic enthusiasm he re-enlisted.

A few weeks later, Uncle Myron was assigned to the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Wasp (CV-7). Since the carrier had been commissioned in Boston on April 25, 1940, Uncle Myron had been in the Navy longer than his ship!

The Wasp served on both sides of the Atlantic, providing air support and transporting troops. The ship patrolled the U.S. Atlantic coast practicing war maneuvers and guarding American interests in the Caribbean. She ferried army fighter aircraft to Iceland and provided military support to help Britain fight the Nazis. Not much excitement in the Atlantic.

In the summer of 1942, the Wasp joined the Pacific Fleet. Japan was confidently occupying the Solomon Islands in the southeast Pacific. By controlling these islands, Japan could cut off American supplies coming from Hawaii and Australia and protect supply sea lanes for its own Pacific fleet.

In August the war in the Pacific focused on one strategic site. The Japanese openly challenged the Americans by trying to build an airfield on Guadalcanal Island. Some historians consider the ensuing "Guadalcanal Campaign of 1942-3" a crucial Allied victory, perhaps even the turning point of the war in the Pacific. Here the Japanese were forced to take a defensive position for the first time since bombing Pearl Harbor. At this point fate stepped in for the crew of the Wasp, including Uncle Myron.

En route to capture Guadalcanal, the Wasp joined a fleet that included two other aircraft carriers, the Saratoga [CV-3] and Enterprise [CV-6], the battleship North Carolina (BB-55), 6 cruisers, 16 destroyers and 3 oilers. As the Americans played "cat and mouse," occupying one island after another, large and small battles raged in the air, on land and at sea. The Navy provided a covering force for convoys carrying reinforcements and supplies.

On September 10, 1942, Uncle Myron turned 24. Five days later, fate wrapped itself around my uncle and did not let go. About 2:30 p.m. he was rehearsing in the band room. "I'm going to the cafeteria to get some lunch," he told his mates. On his way to the cafeteria three Japanese torpedoes struck the Wasp. One hit the band room, killing all the musicians there. The other two torpedoes hit more volatile areas causing ammunition to explode and gasoline to ignite.

Uncle Myron and his shipmates fought fires for almost an hour. They carried wounded sailors out of harm's way so they could be treated. Even though the ship was listing 10 to 15 degrees starboard, no one believed this behemoth aircraft carrier would sink. However, at 3:20 the unthinkable happened: the call came to abandon ship. They prioritized assisting the wounded into rubber rafts. It took the crew only forty minutes to abandon ship.

As a Navy musician, first class, Uncle Myron was not required to know how to swim! It was a long way down from the flight deck, and he did not have a life jacket. When it was his turn to leave, he clutched the fire hose that was dropped over the side of the ship and slowly climbed down that hose, hand over hand. As the sinking ship pitched and heaved, he clung to the swaying hose, with the sea undulating around him. His goal was to drop onto a bobbing cork raft with the help of those already in the raft. It was a small target on a sea lit by fire. If he missed the raft, he knew he would burn to death in an instant.

Uncle Myron dropped into the raft and immediately tied himself down alongside his shipmates. As the filled raft drifted away from the abandoned ship, it floated toward the burning oil that was spreading out over the sea before them. Uncle Myron later told a reporter, "But, miraculously, the flaming oil parted and the raft sailed on through." The rescue ships had to maintain positions far away from the sinking ship, burning seas and the possibility of Japanese submarines still patrolling the waters. He was on that raft in shark-infested waters for three hours before being rescued.

He felt a blanket thrown over his shoulders as he sat on the deck of the rescue ship in his wet clothes. Someone offered him a cup of coffee. He held out a hand, but he was trembling so much that he dropped the coffee; he simply did not

have enough strength left to hold it. That's when he fell to his knees and offered a silent prayer of thanks for his life being spared and those of his shipmates. He also prayed for his friends who had died that day in the music room. Thankfully, his only injury was rope burns on his hands.

Although he lost many friends and fellow band members, he was later grateful to learn there were relatively few casualties. Only 294 of over 2000 people on board died. He also lost his ship.

Another casualty was the U.S.S. Wasp. As the other ships in the fleet cleared the area, only the U.S.S. Lansdowne stayed behind to make sure the Wasp sank. After five hours, the ship was still floating in a sea of fire. The Lansdowne was ordered to shoot five torpedoes to take her down to her final resting place.

Uncle Myron returned to Frankfort, New York, a hero. Given a thirty-day leave for rest and relaxation after his ordeal, he told local newspapers about his escape from death, but he could not tell them where he was in the Pacific, what ships were in the fleet or what ships came to his rescue. After all, we were still be at war with Japan and Germany and would be for three more years.

Uncle Myron returned to active duty. He served twenty-two years before retiring from the Navy. He had many adventures traveling with his family to the

Caribbean, Washington, D.C., Japan and California. However, the story that changed his destiny was the day he survived the torpedoing of the U.S.S. Wasp.

Wouldn't Uncle Myron be surprised to learn that seventy-seven years later, the U.S.S. Wasp has been found two and a half miles down on the floor of the Pacific Ocean? I can only imagine that would bring him bittersweet memories.

I think he might have trouble picturing tourists scuba diving around the Solomon Islands to view the wreckage of Japanese and U.S. aircraft, ships and artillery from World War II. Relics now! Although the ship hulls have served as home to coral, the leaking oil from these wrecks is threatening the sea life and coastline of these beautiful islands. Then again, there would be no tourism to these paradise islands except for the women and men--like Uncle Myron--who served so bravely in order to protect not just American freedom but also the freedom of other nations from greedy aggressors.

Thank you, Uncle Myron! And thank you to all our veterans from subsequent wars for keeping Americans safe and protecting our way of life.

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