



Five members of the Coast Guard crew of LST-884 traded stories and memories about their experiences in war.

Heather S. Hughes, STF May. 17, 2006

Reliving the 'hooligan Navy' of World War II

Five Coast Guardsmen gather in James City County to remember a time of war.

BY JIM HODGES

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JAMES CITY -- They came to Virginia from West Virginia and Pennsylvania and Ohio and Massachusetts, disparate men united more than 60 years ago by a war, by a ship and by a moment none will ever forget.

Five members of the crew of LST-884 are in James City County this week, trading stories and memories and reminding anyone who will listen that the Coast Guard had a role in World War II and don't ever forget it.

"We were the hooligan Navy," says Reed Garcia, who is hosting the reunion. "We were kind of a stepchild."

There is also an honorary crewman, Stu Flockencier, who is in town to hear stories about his father, Del Flockencier, a machinist mate.

"He was just about to go pick up his ship, and I believe he was on leave," Stu says. "He stopped by the hospital in Ohio to see me. I was two days old."

Six months later, Del Flockencier was dead from a Japanese sniper's bullet, shot while standing guard on LST-884.

LST: Landing Ship, Tank has a published top speed of about 12 knots, an actual speed of about nine.

"LST: Large Slow Target," says Al Geary, now 81 and a retired railroad conductor, then a signalman.

The Coast Guard manned about 20 percent of the LSTs used in World War II, but none of the men knew that when they enlisted.

Geary saw a sign in a Philadelphia recruiting station and asked, "Coast Guard, what the hell do they do?"

"I didn't know what the hell I was getting into really. When you're 17, you don't think a lot about it. I thought I was going to see action ... but not that much."

Harold Hartley, now an 83-year-old retired insurance executive living in Gun Barrel City, Texas, wanted to join the Army Air Corps but couldn't pass an eye test.

"Then I was thinking about the Marine Corps," he says, "but I thought, 'If I can't see them, and they can see me, that's a real disadvantage.'

"The Coast Guard was right next door."

Armand Dugas, an 81-year-old retired fire chief from Athol, Mass., liked the idea of Coast Guard ships homeporting in nearby Boston. Joe Boone, an 81-year-old retired teacher, didn't know what he wanted, but he knew he didn't want to work on his father's farm in West Virginia.

And Garcia, an 84-year-old retired railroad executive, found that the Coast Guard recruiting station near his home in Pittsburgh needed somebody who could type.

"I never dreamed I'd end up on the telephone in the conning tower yelling 'abandon ship, abandon ship,' " he says.

They united at Camp Bradford, now Little Creek, then an amphibious training base complete with a mockup of the top deck and bridge of the LST "USS Neversail."

Formed into a crew, they took their new LST-884 from its builder in Pittsburgh to Hawaii, and then on to Iwo Jima, a tough place to start their war.

The ship was to run at the beach that day, Feb. 19, 1945, then drop a stern anchor and keep going until grounding and discharging its cargo of

Marines. Then it was to reverse engines and reel itself in on its anchor to pull off the beach. The operation was designed to take minutes, perhaps hours.

"At Iwo Jima, it took about 10 days," says Garcia. "While we were stuck on the beach, the battleships were offshore lobbing shells over us on Iwo Jima, and the (Japanese) were firing from Mount Suribachi."

They were in the war now, and less than two months later, they were out of it.

At dawn on April 1 off Okinawa, the LST-884's portside guns joined those of the rest of the convoy and opened up on three Japanese planes. Two went down quickly, but the other kept coming.

"Suicide planes would come in, strafe the first ship, circle the second and try to draw fire from the first ship and then they would suicide," Hartley says.

The idea was to try to draw the fire from one ship to the other. Instead, the Kamikaze pilot plowed into the LST-884, killing 24 Marines and one Coast Guardsman and starting a huge fire.

Under the gazebo in James City County this week, some of the survivors still argue whether Lt. Cdr. C.C. Pearson should have ordered the ship abandoned.

Says Geary: "You couldn't stand on the deck, it was so hot."

Adds Reed: "When he first gave the order, he just couldn't get things under control. I think he was right at the time. He was looking out for the crew."

Says Hartley: "It seemed like it was a bit early."

Argues Geary: "When you can't stand on the deck and fight the fire, what are you going to do?"

The answer is to get off the ship.

"We were all picked up by different ships," Hartley says. "I was picked up by the same ship the captain was on, and he said he'd like to go back and put the fire out. So I and another guy recruited a bunch of other guys and we got (equipment) and we looked out on the water and saw the flaming ship and said, 'Put the fire out? What's he thinking?' "

Then they went back and put out the fire, even as LST-884 was settling into the water by its stern.

"The deck was so hot it burned your shoes, and there was exploding ammunition," Hartley says. "I still don't know why we did that."

The ship's war was over. It was towed to a nearby island to wait out the Battle of Okinawa, then towed back to Hawaii. The LST-884 was scuttled in the Pacific on May 6, 1946.

A war they fought wide-eyed is viewed now from the vantage point of time.

"When I was on the 884, I thought an LST must be the crummiest ship in the Navy," Hartley says. "It was a big floating bathtub. But in more recent years you really began to appreciate the engineering that went into an LST."

And they are proud men.

"War was different then," says Dugas. "We just did what we were told to do. We didn't know where we would wind up."



Joe Boone of Bel Air, Md., along with four other former Coast Guardsmen stationed on the LST-884 during World War II, gathered in James City County to reminisce.

Heather S. Hughes/Daily Press
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