



Photo # NH 96011 USS Samuel B. Roberts at sea, October 1944

Hello and welcome to DE-Classified, a podcast showcasing the history of destroyer escorts. Each month a member of Slater's education crew will highlight a specific Destroyer Escort and share the stories of the sailors who served aboard these Trim but Deadly ships. Today we are going to DE Classify USS *Samuel B Roberts*.

My name is John Epp, and I am a tour guide aboard USS SLATER in Albany, NY. As part of our ongoing series to explore the history of destroyer escorts, today we look at "the destroyer escort that fought like a battleship," USS *Samuel B. Roberts* (DE-413).

"*Sammy B*," as the ship would affectionately come to be known, earned her fame during the Battle off Samar, which was collectively a part of the largest naval battle of World War II: Battle of Leyte Gulf. To fully appreciate the history and sacrifice of the brave sailors aboard *Sammy B*, we should first trace the construction and commissioning of this legendary warship.

DE-413 was laid down on 6 December 1943, at Houston, Texas, by Brown Shipbuilding Co. This shipbuilding powerhouse was built as an emergency shipyard to satisfy the Navy's demand for diverse ships

capable of all manner of duties. Employing over 25,000 skilled workers, Brown Shipbuilding would complete nearly 350 vessels, 61 of which were the Navy's latest invention against submarines: the destroyer escort.<sup>1</sup> The history of destroyer escorts has already been covered in our first episode of DE-CLASSIFIED, so be sure to check that out!

After only 6 weeks, *Samuel B. Roberts* slid down the slipway on 6 January 1944 and was sponsored by Anna Roberts, mother of Coxswain Samuel B. Roberts, Jr., for whom the ship is named after.



Born 12 May 1921 in San Francisco, California, Roberts enlisted in the U.S. Naval Reserve on 13 April 1939. Following training, he was recalled to active duty on board the battleship *California* (BB-44) on 12 July 1940 as a seaman second class. On 2 December 1940, seaman Roberts was

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<sup>1</sup> USS Savage, Accessed November 17, 2021, <http://www.usssavage.org/BrownShipyard.html>.

again recalled and assigned to the transport *Heywood* (AP-12). After disembarking some of the first U.S. Marines on Icelandic soil, *Heywood* would transport other passengers to Bermuda, Puerto Rico, and Trinidad during which time Roberts would advance in rate to seaman first class on 1 September 1940. War soon came for the United States and seaman Roberts when the Empire of Japan launched a surprise attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet moored at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941.

Following training exercises, *Heywood* transited the Panama Canal in mid-April 1942, arriving in Pago Pago, Samoa 10 May. From here, Roberts was transferred to another transport, *Hunter Liggett* (AP-27) which was moored at Wellington, New Zealand undergoing refitting and training for the eventual invasion of Guadalcanal. It would be at this battle, codenamed Operation Watchtower, that Roberts would make his country proud resulting in a ship to be named after him.

On the second day of the Guadalcanal campaign, coxswain Roberts disembarked *Hunter Liggett* alongside Lt. Cmdr. Dwight H. Dexter, USCG, and 24 other marines to establish a naval headquarters. Unfortunately for Roberts and the marines on the island, that night and

into the early hours of 9 August, the Japanese navy launched a surprise attack on the American fleet still unloading troops and supplies. Come sunrise, the American ships were nowhere to be seen as they had been routed. One can only imagine the shock and awe that Roberts and his fellow troops must have felt as they gazed out to sea and saw only the smoldering wrecks of their ships.

For the time being, Roberts lived amongst the marines as they struggled to smoke out the Japanese defenders. On 23 September, Lt. Col. Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller’s First Battalion, Seventh Marines moved further inland to investigate the area west of the Mantanikau River. Casualties quickly mounted when they ran into stiff Japanese resistance that was well camouflaged and familiar with the jungle terrain. The Second Battalion, Fifth Marines was called in for support, allowing for casualties, including Puller, to be withdrawn. G Company attempted to cross the river but were forced back by heavy mortar and small arms fire. A new strategy was devised, one that Roberts himself would become a hero for.

The morning of 27 September, the Second Battalion, Fifth Marines began their third assault across the river, this time further upstream. Puller's First Battalion, Seventh Marines would attempt to outflank the Japanese defenders by utilizing the Higgins Boats which had brought them ashore weeks prior. Coxswain Roberts volunteered to crew one of these boats as they ferried the marines west of Point Cruz at 1300 with the support of the destroyer *Monssen* (DD-436).

Quickly, however, the marines were forced to create a defensive perimeter as the Japanese soldiers fought with a strong ferocity. An evacuation was ordered for the pinned down marines who at this time found themselves cut off to the sea by the Japanese that had been able to counter flank. *Monssen's* five-inch guns opened a path for the retreating marines to board the Higgins Boats to safety. At the same time, heavy enemy artillery and small arms fire continued to hamper rescue operations. Roberts's boat shifted their focus to draw the enemy fire away from the marines and in doing so, Roberts was mortally wounded.

For his bravery, Roberts was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross.<sup>2</sup>

His citation reads:

The President of the United States of America takes pride in presenting the Navy Cross (Posthumously) to Coxswain Samuel Booker Roberts, Jr. (NSN: 4143781), United States Naval Reserve, for extraordinary heroism and devotion to duty while serving as a volunteer member of the crew of a Higgins boat used in the evacuation of a group of Marines from a beachhead on Guadalcanal Island, on 27 September 1942. Coxswain Roberts, although he knew that his boat was to be maneuvered into an exposed position for the purpose of drawing fire away from the other boats being used to rescue the trapped Marines, courageously volunteered as a member of the crew. The lightly armed boat was made a target for the enemy fire during the entire evacuation and Coxswain Roberts was mortally wounded just as the operation was completed. His gallant action, taken without regard for his own safety, contributed directly to the highly successful rescue, and was in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.<sup>3</sup>

Two months after her launch, USS *Samuel B. Roberts* was commissioned. On 28 April, Captain De Witt C. Redgrave, superintendent of shipbuilding, officially commissioned the tin can as her crew stood at attention on the fantail. Lt. Cmdr. Robert W. Copeland, USNR (United States Naval Reserve) assumed command and

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<sup>2</sup> Cressman, Robert and Nasuti, Guy, "Samuel B. Roberts I (DE-413) 1944," Naval History and Heritage Command, Published June 17, 2019, <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/s/samuel-b-roberts-de-413-i.html>.

<sup>3</sup> "Samuel Booker Roberts," The Wall of Valor Project, Sightline Media Group. Accessed November 21, 2021, <https://valor.militarytimes.com/hero/20125>.



*1* Rear Adm. David M. LeBreton awards Lt. Cmdr. Copeland the Navy Cross for heroism (Naval History and Heritage Command photograph NH 90677)

issued his orders and set the first watch.<sup>4</sup> For three days the ship moored at the Southern Pacific Pier in the Houston Ship Channel in preparation for her sea trials.

On 3 May, the ship's steam engines were started and the

first of three ships to be named after the San Francisco native began her journey to sea. Unfortunately, that journey did not start off on the right foot. *Sammy B.* made a wrong turn and plowed into an embankment. While no damage was caused to ship, embarrassment certainly spread amongst her crew.

After filling her magazines with thousands of rounds of ammunition including anti-aircraft rounds, depth charges, and torpedoes at the San Jacinto Ordnance Depot, the destroyer escort headed for the

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<sup>4</sup> John Wukovits, *For Crew and Country: The Inspirational True Story of Bravery and Sacrifice Aboard the USS Samuel B. Roberts*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013), 40.



Gulf of Mexico for ten days of sea trials before sailing for Bermuda and a more intense shakedown which she completed 19 June. Her first escort came shortly after when she was assigned an escort of the freighter *Berkshire* to Norfolk, Virginia. She then traveled to Boston for post-shakedown availability and further sea trials.

It was during her voyage south from Boston that Sammy B. scored her first kill of the war: a whale. Shortly after leaving Boston, an unidentified object was heard on sonar. Two large and violent crashes were heard and felt, throwing men against bulkheads. Below decks, some of the sailors feared their ship, which probably still had a fresh paint scent, had been torpedoed! Others worried they had run aground. Quickly, evidence of the whale was seen as the ocean turned red and chunks floated past the warship. Copeland had his executive officer, Lieutenant Roberts, note their location and the water depth of 75 fathoms (450 feet) because a Naval investigation would certainly be conducted, and Copeland wanted it to be clear to the investigators that he had not run his ship aground. Lt. Erwin, the division's doctor, was also tasked with preserving some of the whale as proof. The damage? A

damaged propeller and shaft along with the destruction of their sonar dome.<sup>5</sup>

The death of the whale and subsequent trip to the drydock was a blessing in disguise. For one night, while in Norfolk, Copeland, and Lt. Gurnett were returning to the ship from liberty. A tiny dog was discovered along the pier that was in obvious need of a meal. He was taken aboard and given the proper name of Sammy. In *Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors*, more is written of Sammy and his adventures at sea which can be found on pages 36 and 37.

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<sup>5</sup> Wukovits, *For Crew and Country*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013), 53-55.

than theirs was required if the dog was to be made a crew member in good standing. It was well after midnight, but they summoned Doc Erwin.

The sleep-ruffled physician arrived as ordered, standing on the cold floor of the wardroom in slippers, a skivvy shirt, and cotton khaki trousers. As the doctor rubbed his eyes, Copeland said, "We have a new recruit on board, and I want you to give him a physical and make out a health record for him so that we can properly take him up in the ship's company." Erwin stared at him. Had he really been called at three A.M. to perform a routine physical exam on a new crew member?

Gurnett brought Erwin some coffee. "Come on, Doc, sit down," he said. The physician looked around for his patient. Copeland gestured beneath the large table. Erwin looked down at his feet, saw the puppy, and erupted in anger. He told the captain what he thought of his and the first lieutenant's little joke. On the verge of stomping off to his bunk, he was stopped in his tracks when Copeland said, "Oh, this dog is going to be the ship's mascot, and everything has to be just so." Grudgingly, the doctor pulled out his stethoscope and got to work.

His skipper was impressed. "He really gave the puppy a thorough going-over. He took the stethoscope and checked the dog's heart and lungs, and he got the blood pressure thing out and wrapped him up. I don't think he had any more idea how to take a dog's blood pressure than I did. He made out a complete medical report on the puppy. He put on a good show for just the two of us, Gurnett and me. Then he sent for the chief yeoman. I think he was as put out as Dr. Erwin had been at being broken out of his bunk. However, he entered into the spirit of it too and made up a service record for the puppy. We forthwith named the mascot Sammy."

Given the rating seaman second class, Sammy received a rapid promotion to petty officer during a tour of the boiler room initiated by an obliging fireman who found him peering down a hatch toward the black gang's wonderland. The noise of the boilers threw the animal into a fit. As he relieved himself onto the hot steel deck, he earned his rating of water tender first class.

A sailor adept at tailoring, Sam Blue, took a kapok life jacket and, with a few cuts and stitches, fashioned a miniature life jacket for the dog. Sammy made a splash. Speculation flew in *The Gismo*, the

*Tin Cans / 37*

ship newsletter, that he had a canine paramour in Tokyo and saw the DE-413 as his quickest way across the Pacific.

The teenagers and young men aboard the *Samuel B. Roberts* acquired a certain degree of affection for the mammals that touched their lives, both the one they had accidentally killed and the one they now saved. With their official mascot now on board, the boys joined by their dog, the ship's journey to the Pacific was delayed no further.

And to the Pacific she went! In late July, she began her long voyage to the Pacific. Along the way, she transited the Panama Canal and arrived at Pearl Harbor 10 August. Throughout the voyage, she intercepted multiple unknown ships that eventually came back as allied merchant ships.

After arriving in the Marshall Islands, the ship's crew split in two and played a friendly game of softball. Goldstein's Goons easily beat out Harrington's All Stars 11-4. I guess they weren't true all stars.

Another convoy was added to her resume when she joined the minesweepers *Impeccable* (AM-320) and *Gladiator* (AM-319) to escort convoy EP-9 to Pearl Harbor. Multiple sonar and radar contacts were

made by Sammy B., but none ever resulted in any enemy vessels.

Following a stint in buoy upkeep, she joined another convoy steaming for the Marshall Islands. After arriving, she was given orders to travel to Manus Island to prepare for the invasion of the Philippines. During the voyage, her crew participated in the time-honored tradition of crossing the Equator, allowing for those that had never crossed (pollywogs) into shellbacks (those that have crossed). Within our collection, we have numerous certificates, photographs, and artifacts from these ceremonies so be sure to ask about our collections tour next time you visit!

On 12 October, *Sammy B.* joined forces with the very ships that would be alongside when she wrote herself into the history books only days later. Fellow destroyer escorts *John C. Butler* (DE-339), *Dennis* (DE-405), and *Raymond* (DE-341) joined *Sammy B.* to screen the escort carriers *Kitkun Bay* (CVE-71) and *Gambier Bay* (CVE-73) as they provided aerial support for ships off Leyte 19 October. It was here that the six ships joined the now famous “Taffy 3.”

Taffy 3 was one of three escort carrier units within Rear Adm. Thomas Sprague’s Task Group 77.4. Each Taffy unit had their own

commander and consisted of multiple escort carriers along with their respective escorts. Taffy 1 took up station off northern Mindanao; Taffy 2 guarded the entrance to Leyte Gulf and Taffy 3 patrolled just north off the island of Samar. Taffy 3 was led by Rear Adm. Clifton Sprague, though there is no relation to Thomas Sprague.

With the invasion of the Philippines fully underway, the three carrier units launched attacks on the Japanese-held airfields on the islands, supported ground operations, and patrolled the seas over eastern Leyte Gulf. On 24 October, Operation Shogo 1 commenced. Devised as a response to the American invasion of the Philippines, Japanese officials worried that an American victory there would cut off vital fuel resources in the East Indies; a three-pronged naval operation was concocted.

The Combined Fleet, which consisted of three Japanese forces, was under the command of Admiral Soemu Toyoda. He had been appointed commander of the Combined Fleet on 3 May 1944, following the death of Admiral Mineichi Koga whose plane crashed during a typhoon in late March 1944. Adm. Toyoda did not believe war with the

United States was needed to achieve their goals in expanding their empire but also believed that as a soldier, his job was to obey orders and avoid politics.<sup>6</sup>

The three-pronged attack of Operation Shogo 1 was divided into a Northern Force led by Vice Adm. Jisaburo Ozawa. This force consisted of attack carriers meant to draw the attention of Admiral Halsey and lure the large American battleships and carriers of the Third Fleet away from the Philippines. With the bulk of the American navy absent, the other two prongs of the Japanese plan would sail in under the cover of darkness and annihilate the American landing forces.

The Center Force, under the command of Vice Adm. Takeo Kurita, was to sail through the San Bernardino Strait. Within this force sailed some of the largest and most fierce ships the world had ever seen

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<sup>6</sup> C. Peter Chen, "Soemu Toyoda," World War II Database, [https://ww2db.com/person\\_bio.php?person\\_id=45](https://ww2db.com/person_bio.php?person_id=45).

including the *Yamato*.



At the same time, the Southern Force was to sail through the Surigao Strait to join forces with Kurita's Center Force and create an unimaginably powerful fleet. Unfortunately for everyone involved, there was just too many moving pieces and unknown variables in play which would result in extreme losses on both sides.

So, on 24 October, Adm. Ozawa began his part of operation. Sailing from the north towards Cape Engano, near Luzon, Ozawa intentionally gave away his position to Halsey's Third Fleet. While he was in possession of some rather formidable carriers, Ozawa lacked enough skilled pilots to create much havoc. The once mighty Japanese carrier force had lost a significant percentage of their aircraft at the "Great Marianas Turkey Shoot" earlier that summer. But, despite not



having air superiority, Japanese naval leaders were confident their superior battleships would secure victory.

Halsey took the bait and sailed his Third Fleet to finish off the Japanese carriers once and for all. The absence of his ships left Taffy 3 to guard the American invasion fleet. Taffy 1 focused on launching air attacks against the Southern Force which had been detected before they were able to transit Surigao Strait.<sup>7</sup> Taffy 2 positioned themselves in the central spot off Samar but at a distance that made it difficult to assist Taffy 3.

Adm. Kurita's Center Force was detected prior to Ozawa revealing his position. Before his fleet of nearly two dozen ships had even entered San Bernadino Strait, two American submarines pounced on him, sinking four ships including his flagship *Atago*, forcing Kurita to swim to a nearby destroyer. He would go on to shift his flagship to the *Yamato* from which he would watch, on 24 October, the sister ship, *Musashi*,

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<sup>7</sup> "The Battle of Leyte Gulf, 23-26 October 1944," Naval History and Heritage Command, Accessed November 20, 2021, <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/world-war-ii/1944/battle-of-leyte-gulf.html>.

absorb nineteen torpedoes and seventeen bombs before slipping beneath the waves with over one thousand sailors.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately for Taffy 3, Halsey had taken every ship in his disposal north to attack Ozawa's carries, erroneously believing that Kurita's San Bernadino fleet had been damaged far greater than in actuality. Halsey's pilots had made the mistake of exaggerating their success, leaving the admiral to conclude that if Kurita continued through the strait, the three small taffy units would have no trouble finishing them off. These assumptions would prove disastrous for the men of Taffy 3.

Just after midnight on 25 October, Kurita's damaged, but still strong, line of twenty-three warships entered the Philippine Sea. Expecting to encounter American battleships, Kurita was surprised to see nothing but darkness and feel a stiff breeze on his face. For the next few hours, his warships sailed southeast, parallel to the Samar coastline.

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<sup>8</sup> *For Crew and Country*, 118-119.

Just before 0700, a lone American TBM Avenger piloted by Bill Brooks from the escort carrier *St. Lo* was spotted.<sup>9</sup>

Inside the Avenger, ensign Brooks spotted what he believed to be Halsey's Third Fleet. Brooks, along with his fellow members of Taffy 3 believed Kurita's force had turned in retreat. But his assumptions were quickly proved false when he recognized the tall pagoda masts of the Japanese ships. He didn't have much time to process his thoughts when he was greeted by a sky filled with black puffs of anti-aircraft fire.<sup>10</sup>

The time was 0643 and Brooks immediately fired off a radio message to the *St. Lo*. "Enemy surface force of four battleships, four heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, and ten to twelve destroyers sighted twenty miles northwest of your task group and closing in on you at thirty knots."<sup>11</sup> "Ziggy" Sprague of Taffy 3 became incensed. He too believed the ships to be elements of Halsey's Third Fleet and that this lone ensign had broke radio silence to announce their presence and alert any possible Japanese ships the location of American carriers. He ordered Brooks to

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<sup>9</sup> James D. Hornfischer, *Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors: The Extraordinary World War II Story of the U.S. Navy's Finest Hour*, (New York: Bantam Dell, 2004), 132.

<sup>10</sup> Hornfischer, *Last Stand*, 135.

<sup>11</sup> *Last Stand*, 135-136.

confirm his reports by dropping down to two thousand feet and snapping some photographs. He confirmed his initial report in a second radio transmission to which Sprague realized his small flotilla of escort carriers, destroyers, and destroyer escorts were no match.

Sprague had only two options at his disposal: stay and fight against a much superior enemy force and meet certain death or attempt to retreat and fight another day. The second option sounds like the better of the two. However, the small escort carriers were slower than the capital ships of Kurita's Center Force. Eventually, they would catch up. If he chose to stay and fight, his small contingent of destroyers would have to sail head on into the *Yamato* and other ships to launch their spread of torpedoes, an action that is surely suicidal.

At 0655, *Samuel B. Roberts* went to general quarters. Within minutes, her lookouts reported large columns of water between her and the *Johnston*. These columns of water were illuminated by different colored dyes to allow for the Japanese ships to track their fire. Many of these splashes were being fired by the cruisers and battleships of the Center Force. *Roberts* and her fellow destroyers quickly laid down a

smoke screen to shield their retreat and protect the carriers. Fortunately, a rain squall was in their path and Taffy 3 received a small reprieve from the high caliber guns of Kurita's ships which lacked the sophisticated radar to track the Americans in a storm.

At the same time, Cmdr. Copeland addressed his worried men over the 1MC. He admitted to them that their ship—their home—would be entering, “a fight against overwhelming odds from which survival could not be expected, during which time we would do what damage we could.”<sup>12</sup> For the next few minutes, Copeland's crew of teenagers readied themselves for the fight ahead.

At 0716, Sprague ordered the screen commander, Cmdr. William Thomas aboard *Hoel* to, “Stand by to form two torpedo groups, big boys in one group and little fellas in another group.”<sup>13</sup> When the order was relayed to the Copeland, all he heard was “Little fellows, make a torpedo attack.”<sup>14</sup> This command confused Copeland who realized that if the destroyer escorts (little fellas) attacked with the destroyers (big boys),

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhrc/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/s/samuel-b-roberts-de-413-i.html>.

<sup>13</sup> *Last Stand*, 177.

<sup>14</sup> *Last Stand*, 198.

then the carriers would be left without protection. But if he waited to attack with his fellow destroyer escorts, the carriers may be gone by then!

As Copeland fought with himself on what to do, the *Heermann* stormed past the *Roberts* attempting to join her fellow destroyers on their torpedo attack. To avoid a collision, both ships had to lower their speed and the fletcher steered clear. This reduction in speed made it difficult for *Heermann* to join the *Johnston* and *Hoel*. Copeland decided then and there to attack without any direct orders. He reasoned, that despite being the junior destroyer escort commander, he was in a better position to attack than his fellow DE's and the Japanese ships were in a prime location for her torpedoes.

After conferring with his executive officer Bob Roberts, Copeland called his chief engineering officer, Lt. Bill "Lucky" Trowbridge.

"Lucky, this is the Captain. Lucky, we are going on a torpedo attack, and I have rung up full speed; we are going in at twenty knots. As soon as we fire our fish, I will ring up flank speed and I want you to hook on everything you've got. Don't worry about your reduction gears or your

boilers or anything because there's all hell being thrown at us up here, and we're just fortunate we haven't been hit yet."<sup>15</sup> *Sammy's* boilers were designed to carry 440 pounds of steam pressure. Lucky was able to push it to 660 pounds of steam. The crew *Samuel B. Roberts* was now steaming behind *Heermann* and straight into the heart of the Japanese navy.

As the ships of Taffy 3 made their last-ditch effort to launch their torpedoes, the first of the American destroyers fell. *Johnston*, after firing her ten torpedoes, was struck by a series of fourteen-inch shells, probably from battleship *Kongo*. Six-inch shells quickly followed, possibly from the *Yamato*. Shortly after, *Johnston* slipped below the waves at 1010 only minutes after the "abandon ship" order was issued. Captain Evans was last seen moving forward from the fantail in search of any of his crew that hadn't made it off yet. James Hornfischer gives Evans an eloquent send off in *Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors*. "The 'Chief' of Annapolis, the Cherokee warrior unhorsed by enemy gunfire,

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<sup>15</sup> *Last Stand*, 200.

was lost to the whirlwind, taken to a private oblivion that to this day burnishes his mystique and deepens the legend of his late, great destroyer and its magnificent crew.”<sup>16</sup>

On the *Samuel B. Roberts*, the heavy cruiser *Chokai* came into her sights. At a range of four thousand yards, a salvo of three torpedoes was fired. Sources seem to differ on whether any of them found their mark. Copeland believes he saw a column of water around the time they would have struck. Other sources believe the torpedoes missed and the explosion he saw may have come from a 500lb bomb dropped by a TBM Avenger. Whether or not the *Samuel B. Roberts* or an aircraft, *Chokai* would not live to see another day and now sits three miles under water.

Copeland next turned his attention to the cruiser *Chikuma*, twelve times the size of the *de*. At a range so close you could see the wrinkles in uniforms, the five-inch guns of the *Roberts* opened fire. While not powerful enough to puncture the hull, the five-inch shells proved just strong enough to riddle the superstructure and riddle the Japanese

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<sup>16</sup> *Last Stand*, 344.



officers and crew with shrapnel and cause numerous fires. Over 600 rounds were fired before the tin can became a casualty of war.

Fourteen-inch shells were falling closer and closer as *Kongo* began to track the little fella. The shells fell in a procession as they tracked closer and closer to Copeland's ship. Through some quick mental math, he determined that if he continued at his current course and speed, his ship would be blasted to Davy Jones's locker. All engines were ordered back full and the de groaned to a stop just as the shell splashes landed in what would have been the ship's position had Copeland not given the order.

This luck did not last. At 0851, three eight-inch shells from a heavy cruiser punctured the 3/8<sup>th</sup>-inch thick hull. Lights and communication were severed, and men were thrown like ragdolls. The third shell entered the forward fireroom, killing all but two men inside the compartment. Other shells found their mark as well, destroying multiple 40mm Bofors and the two five-inch deck guns. Gun 52 was destroyed when a shell cooked off inside the breech, killing everyone inside. With her weapons dead and her speed cut in half, the ship that

would come to be known as “the destroyer escort that fought like a battleship” was dead in the water and at 0910, Copeland gave the order to abandon ship. As men leapt into the shark-infested waters, the ship’s mascot, Sammy, did the same. From *Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors*:

The dog, too, swam to momentary safety. Somehow Sammy got off the ship and, without the benefit of his custom-tailored canine flotation device, paddled out to a raft. He was there only a short time, however, when he decided that he belonged back on the *Samuel B. Roberts*, his home. The dog jumped off the raft and swam back toward the sinking ship. No one knew his fate for certain, but that was the last anyone saw of him. Sammy either drowned during the swim or went down with his ship.

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Nearly an hour later, her surviving crew watched as their beloved home away from home slipped below the waves. For the next 50 hours, her surviving crew struggled to remain afloat with limited food and water. Covered in oil, the men also became victims of sharks. On the morning of 27 October, 120 men of *Samuel B. Roberts* were rescued by various ships led by Lt. Cmdr. James A. Baxter. In all, 1,150 survivors from four ships were plucked from the ocean by rescue ships.

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<sup>17</sup> *Last Stand*, 327.

For his heroism, Lt. Cmdr. Copeland was awarded the Navy Cross on 16 July 1945. Following the war, the man from Tacoma, Washington—who had not been able to join the Naval Academy due to his mother’s health—returned to his pre-war law career and remained in the Naval Reserve, rising to the rank of Rear Admiral, before his death in his hometown on 25 August 1973. His legacy lived on when the guided-missile frigate *USS Copeland* (FFG-25) was commissioned 7 August 1982. On a hot August day leading up to the commissioning, many of the surviving crew held a reunion. Stories were told, laughs were had, and tears were shed. When Copeland’s widow and daughter entered the San Pedro, California banquet hall, the men erupted in a standing ovation in honor of their skipper that had saved their lives nearly four decades prior.

Four American ships from Taffy 3 were lost that day. Here, I have only covered two: *Samuel B. Roberts* and *Johnston*. I don’t want to end this without commenting on the bravery of *Hoel* and *Gambier Bay*. The heroism of both these ships and the rest of Taffy 3 is why more American lives weren’t lost that day. The ferocity at which all of Taffy 3

fought convinced Kurita that they were facing the much larger capital ships which he had expected to encounter after exiting the San Bernadino Strait. *Hoel* followed *Johnston* and *Heermann* in charging Kurita's flotilla and despite taking numerous shells prior to launching her first volley of torpedoes at one of the battleships steaming towards the escort carriers, she continued to maneuver and keep the attention away from the carriers. After even more shells found their mark, *Hoel* successfully launched her final five torpedoes before going dead in the water with a twenty-degree list. At 0840, the abandon ship order was passed throughout the ship.<sup>18</sup>

*Gambier Bay* was the only carrier to be sunk in Taffy 3. Thanks to the bravery of her pilots and escorts, her fellow carrier was able to escape. After the Center Force was spotted and her screening ships charged in for torpedo runs, *Gambier Bay* launched all but two of her aircraft. These planes, just like the destroyers and destroyer escorts, repeatedly dove at Kurita's ships like a swarm of bees. Some carried

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<sup>18</sup> Stephanie Harry, "Hoel I (DD-533) 1943-1944," Naval History and Heritage Command, Published October 7, 2019, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/h/hoel-i.html>.

only bombs or torpedoes while others only had a few hundred rounds of machine gun ammunition to pepper the many guns and superstructures. Their persistence, even when out of ammunition, provided *Gambier Bay* and her fellow escort carriers valuable minutes to steam further away from the encroaching giants of Center Force. Numerous Japanese hits were recorded on the carrier, but it was not until 0820 that a larger caliber shell from a cruiser or one of the battleships ripped into her forward engine room. As fires and flooding consumed the ship, she capsized at 0907 and sank only four minutes later.<sup>19</sup>

Most of the remaining ships of Taffy 3 sustained damage and casualties but were not sunk. By the end of the day, despite significant losses Taffy 3 escaped the fight and in fact, forced Kurita's Center Force to retreat. Their tenacity in defending the invasion force of the Philippines proved to be one of the final pieces in the defeat of the once mighty Japanese navy.

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<sup>19</sup> Mark L. Evans, "Gambier Bay (CVE-73) 1943-1944," Naval History and Heritage Command, Published Sept. 17, 2008, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/g/gambier-bay.html>.

I will end this episode of DE-Classified with a quote from Red Harrington, the ship's boatswain's mate 1<sup>st</sup> class, at the reunion:

“Those men on the *Sammy B.* were my family, my home; they were closer to me than I can say.... I now know men do not fight for flag or country or glory. They fight for one another. Any man in combat who lacks comrades who will die for him is not a man at all. He is truly damned.”

Thank you for listening to DE Classified. This podcast is brought to you by the Destroyer Escort Historical Museum aboard USS SLATER. You can find a transcript of this episode, accompanying photos, and a bibliography at [usslater.org/DE-Classified](http://usslater.org/DE-Classified). I'm John Epp and I hope you join us next month when we DE Classify USS BASSETT.

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