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April 12, 2005

Honoring the Greatest Generation: Discovery of Sunken U.S. Destroyer Leads to Pilgrimage of Elder Sailors

A geyser of water suddenly shot straight up over the destroyer's superstructure when a deadly Japanese torpedo exploded at the ship's vulnerable midsection, breaking the vessel in two. In a matter of seconds, the USS *Cooper* (DD-695) exhaled her last breath during one of the most fiercely fought, yet least known battles in the Pacific theatre of WWII, the December 1944 Battle of Ormoc Bay at Leyte Island in the Philippines. After 60 long years, the *Cooper* is now poised to receive a special onboard memorial plaque dedicated to the 191 brave sailors who accompanied the noble warship to her final resting place 720 feet below the surface of the bloodstained bay.



USS Cooper (DD-695)



Rob Lalumiere

On May 28 this Memorial Day weekend, Rob Lalumiere, a highly trained and experienced deep/technical scuba diver, will make a world record attempt at the deepest dive to a sunken wreck in order to place the 2 ft. square, 40 lb. engraved bronze plaque on the anchor housing of the *Cooper*. Says Lalumiere, a WWII enthusiast and resident of Lebanon, New Hampshire, "The men of the *Cooper* should not be forgotten, as their valiant service was crucial in winning the battle for Ormoc Bay."

Highlight of the event will be the attendance of actual survivors from the *Cooper* sinking, originally numbering 168 men from the ship's full company of 359 officers and enlisted personnel. Despite their advanced ages, the octogenarian fellows who were rescued from the dark Ormoc waters by PBY Catalina flying boats, plan to travel half the globe to pay their last respects and share a final solemn moment with their fallen former shipmates. It is hoped they will get closure on an event that has troubled their minds and spirits since that fateful night. The inscription on the memorial plaque reads:

“USS Cooper (DD-695). Sunk by enemy fire on the night of December 2-3, 1944.

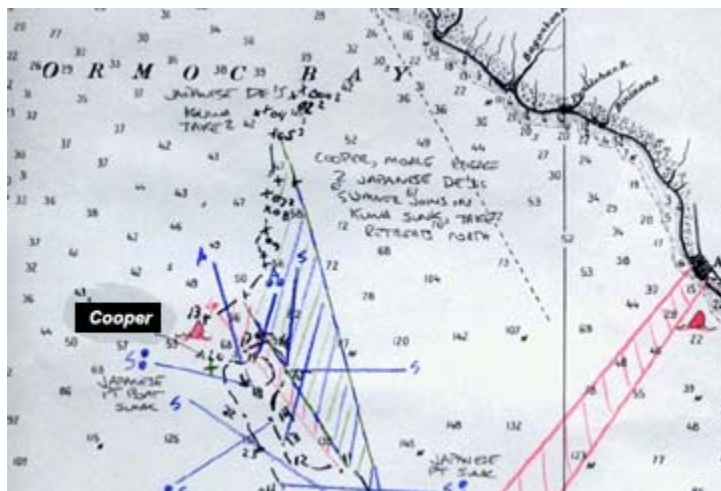
In memory of the 191 United States Navy sailors lost that night and who continue to stand watch for their country for all eternity. May they never be forgotten.

Presented by Officers and Crew of the

USS ALLEN M. SUMNER (DD-692)
USS MOALE (DD-693)
USS COOPER (DD-695)

Dedicated and placed by Rob Lalumiere, May 2005”

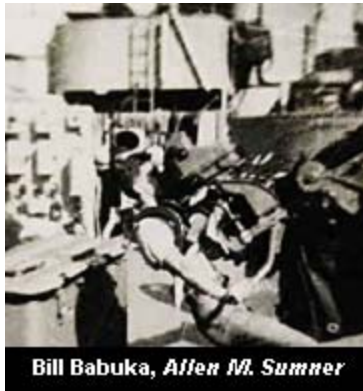
Three sister ships of the Navy's newest Sumner class destroyer were heavily involved in the Battle of Ormoc Bay: USS *Allen M. Sumner* (DD-692, namesake of the class); USS *Moale* (DD-693); and *Cooper*. Lalumiere discovered the likely remains of the *Cooper* after diving



Ormoc Bay for two years, using the tracks plotted by the three destroyers during the battle. Destiny played a vital role, for it is beyond happenstance that the tracks of all three vessels would be ascertained so that an accurate search could be

mounted, especially given the fact that all three destroyers no longer actively exist (one sunk, two scrapped). Without the tracks, it is unlikely that the diver Lalumiere would have ever found

the *Cooper*. Ron Babuka, son of Bill Babuka, a sailor stationed aboard the *Sumner* during Ormoc, obtained the original *Moale* track, prepared during the battle by Combat Information Officer Irv Wiggs, from Pete Kappes, who was stationed on the *Moale* at the same time Babuka's father was on the *Sumner*. Ron then superimposed the Sumner and Cooper tracks



Bill Babuka, *Allen M. Sumner*

over the original and gave the finished piece to Lalumiere to use as a guide map.

Ormoc Bay was a key strategic point and supply depot port for Japanese forces, particularly after General Douglas MacArthur made his awaited return to Leyte Island in October 1944 and began staging his troops for victory in the Pacific.

Ultimate control of Leyte by the United States military came after four months of seemingly continuous engagements, while Japan suffered her worst naval defeats during this period and began the process of retreat unto her final surrender. However, before she was finished to suffer ignominious defeat, Japan would visit the horror of waves of kamikaze attacks upon the U.S. fleet as it inched close to invasion of the motherland. Many U.S. sailors, marines, soldiers and resistance civilians were killed or wounded during the quest to wrest control of Leyte by way of Ormoc Bay. The memorial for the *Cooper* is a poignant gesture to salute the high price paid by her courageous young men, while calling attention to the numerous others who also made the final sacrifice there to save their country and world from the crushing boot of despotism.

Bigfoot Productions is filming the May 28 dive for future broadcast, and a book about the dive and Ormoc Bay's WWII history is planned. The USS Cooper Memorial Project is sponsored by the Battle of Ormoc Bay Association, the USS Allen M. Sumner Association, Project Development International (USA), CIGI & SIG (members BOC Group), Action Divers, LaLaguna Beach Club and Mandarin Divers, Dive VIP Seaside Resort, Machine-Aid Tech and Full Moon Restaurant. Many of the hours and much of the equipment have been donated by

Lalumiere and other volunteers, but true raw costs will be in the range of \$25,000.00. So far, \$10,000.00 has been raised. Supporters who wish to make contributions of any amount should contact Rob Lalumiere at: rjlhvt@valley.net; or Ron Babuka at: wrb1@cornell.edu; or

The Battle of Ormoc Bay Association
C/o William M. Dallam, Secretary-Treasurer
117 Tuscarora Street
Harrisburg, PA 17104

If preferred, donations may be made directly to:

Expedition Ormoc Bay Account
C/o Mascoma Savings Bank
Park Street
Lebanon, NH 03766

For extensive background on the battle itself, including official reports, personal stories, and other fascinating information, go to the Sumner's website at <http://www.dd-692.com>.

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