



# The Sumner Sentinel ©

Summer 2021

Volume VIII Number II

---

---

## “The Ship That Would Not Die”

### *History of the USS Laffey (Part II)*

USS Laffey (DD-724), an Allen M. Sumner-class destroyer, earned the nickname “The Ship That Would Not Die” for her exploits during the battle of Okinawa when she successfully withstood a determined assault by conventional bombers and the most unrelenting kamikaze air attacks in history.

When the battle was finally over the grim toll was staggering: 80 minutes of continuous air attack, 22 separate attacks being badly damaged by four bombs, six kamikaze crashes, and strafing fire that killed 32 and wounded 71.

Assistant communications officer Lt. Frank Manson asked Captain Becton if he thought they'd have to abandon ship, to which he snapped, “No! I'll never abandon ship as long as a single gun will fire.” Becton did not hear a nearby lookout softly say, “And if I can find one man to fire it.”

Pilot Carl Rieman lined up behind another B5N and expended the last

of his ammunition. Returning to his carrier (the Shamrock Bay) he made diving passes at kamikazes, forcing some of them to break off their attacks. The other three Wildcats destroyed a few aircraft and then interfered with the enemy's attack runs after they exhausted their ammunition

until forced to return when their fuel ran too low to stay. Later on, a group of 12 American Vought F4U Corsair fighters of the United States Marine Corps intercepted the kamikazes. Their actions were of significant help for the Laffey.



Another D3A approached the disabled Laffey from port. A Corsair pursued the kamikaze and destroyed it after forcing it to overshoot the ship. The Corsair lined up behind a Ki-43 ‘Oscar’ (Japanese Plane) making a strafing approach on Laffey from starboard. One of Laffey's gunners hit the Oscar, causing it to crash into the ship's mast and fall into the water. The pursuing Corsair also crashed

See Laffey, Page 4

## Reunion Association Officers

### President.

Frank DiBello  
[DIBELLOFP@AOL.COM](mailto:DIBELLOFP@AOL.COM)

### 1st Vice President

Open  
[xxx@xxx.com](mailto:xxx@xxx.com)

### 2nd Vice President

Open  
[xxx@xxx.com](mailto:xxx@xxx.com)

### (Still) Past President

Bob Kelly  
[B692@AOL.COM](mailto:B692@AOL.COM)

### Secretary

Scott Kopfstein  
[kopyy4554@zoominternet.net](mailto:kopyy4554@zoominternet.net)

### Treasurer

Pete Dromms  
[the.chief@verizon.net](mailto:the.chief@verizon.net)

### Chaplain

James Gorman  
[jasmgorm@gmail.com](mailto:jasmgorm@gmail.com)

### Master-At-Arms

Pete Dromms  
[the.chief@verizon.net](mailto:the.chief@verizon.net)

### Historian

Fred Willshaw  
[fred@dd-692.com](mailto:fred@dd-692.com)

### Directors/Terms Expire

John Hruska  
- 2020 -  
[jhruska@centurylink.net](mailto:jhruska@centurylink.net)

Open  
- 2021 -  
[xxx@xxx.com](mailto:xxx@xxx.com)

Joe Drabick  
- 2022 -  
[oldesalt692@gmail.com](mailto:oldesalt692@gmail.com)

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE . . .

To all Shipmates of the Allen S. Sumner:  
Even though a lot of us now have been totally vaccinated we are playing it safe by deciding not to have a "formal" reunion this year.



**Frank DiBello**

We are all hoping to get back to "normal" next year and hold a reunion in May 2022.

It will still be held in the Galveston/Houston Texas area in order to take care of unfinished business such as the election of officers and selec-

tion of future reunion sites.

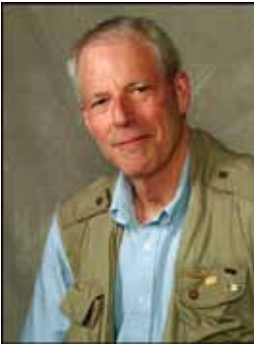
Based on our bylaws I'm sure that Nashville, Tenn. will be the next place to be designated, but that will be up to the majority of those attending the next reunion.

I know many wanted to just go to Nashville, but that's not how we do things.

Frank DiBello, President

USS Allen M. Sumner Reunion Association





By Don Hayden  
TM3 (1961-62)



I've always been musically inclined – usually playing “by ear”

although I did take piano lessons when I was in junior high school. There was a time when I could read music but I don't have those brain cells any more.

There was one summer my dad sprung for violin lessons I guess thinking I was going to be the next great virtuoso.

I still had the fiddle after I got out of the Navy but when I met a guy who turned me on to bluegrass traded it for a 5-string banjo.

But I'm getting of myself.

When I graduated from high school most gifts were usually cufflinks some was money which totaled \$30 (big bucks in 1958).

I used the money to buy a guitar from a First Street (red light district) pawn shop.

It was in really good shape and my mother made a soft case for it.

I didn't know it was an “F-Hole classical type instead of what you see nowadays.

Ask Joe Gall what that means.

Somewhere along the line I traded the guitar for a coronet as I always wanted to learn how to play one.

It came with a hard case with velvet inserts – really sharp looking.

I took it with me when I reported to the Sumner which was still in the Charleston dry dock ship-yards so consequently the crew slept in a barracks.

I was bunking with a bunch of snipes and the first thing one of them said was “what's in the case?”

Of course I had to show them

And then got my first lesson in “coronet to the pawnshop; we'll get it out on payday.”

And that's what we did on multiple occasions.

Now fast forward when we were on the way to the Med and being so musically inclined can get you in trouble.

Big Time!

By this time I was getting pretty good with the coronet and would play tunes on the torpedo deck like “In the Mood” or “Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White.”

As long as we were “steamin” along the sounds went aft; Otherwise not much.

Evidently the skipper – Cmdr Flynn heard me and summoned me to the bridge and asked if I could play “Taps”?

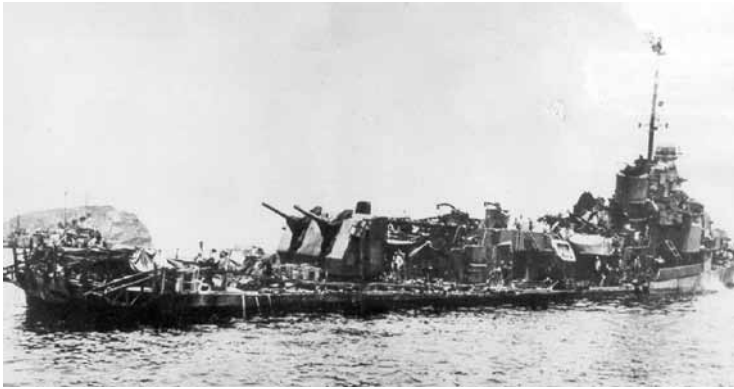
Without thinking where that would lead I said “Sure, that's a simple tune.”

“Come back to the bridge at 2200 hours and play Taps!,” he said.

I did so (using the bridge phone talker) but suspect it woke up half the ship.

**Laffey** into the  
**Continued from Page 1** ship's  
radar  
antenna and fell into the water, but the  
pilot was later rescued by LCS-51.

Another D3A came from the stern  
and dropped a bomb detonating off  
the port side. The D3A was later  
destroyed by a Corsair. The Corsair  
quickly lined up behind another D3A  
and fired; but the bomb from the  
second D3A hit and destroyed one of  
Laffey's 40 mm gun mounts, killing  
all its gunners. The Corsair lined up  
behind two Oscars approaching from



the bow, took out one, and was shot  
down by the other. The surviving  
Oscar was then shot down by Laffey's  
gunners. Laffey's main battery  
destroyed a D3A approaching from  
starboard. The last attacker, a D4Y,  
was shot down by a Corsair.

Laffey was then taken under tow  
and anchored off Okinawa on 17 April  
1945. Temporary repairs were rushed  
and the destroyer sailed for Saipan,  
arriving on 27 April. Four days later,  
she got underway for the west coast  
via Eniwetok and Hawaii, arriving at

Tacoma, Washington on 24 May. She  
entered drydock at Todd Shipyard  
Corp. for repair until 6 September,  
then sailed for San Diego, arriving on  
9 September.

Two days later, Laffey got under-  
way for exercises but collided with  
the submarine chaser PC-815 in a  
thick fog. She rescued all but one of  
the PC's crew before returning to San  
Diego for repairs.

On 5 October, she sailed for Pearl  
Harbor, arriving on 11 October.  
Laffey operated in Hawaiian waters  
until 21 May 1946, when she par-

ticipated in  
Operation  
Crossroads, the  
atomic bomb  
tests at Bikini  
Atoll, actively  
engaged in  
collecting  
scientific data.  
Radioactive  
decontamina-  
tion of Laffey

required the "sandblasting and paint-  
ing of all underwater surfaces, and  
acid washing and partial replacement  
of salt-water piping and evaporators."  
Upon completion of decontamination,  
she sailed for the west coast via Pearl  
Harbor arriving San Diego on 22  
August for operations along the west  
coast.

In February 1947, Laffey made a  
cruise to Guam and Kwajalein and  
returned to Pearl Harbor on 11 March.

**See Next Page**

# Sumner Shipmate Meets Final Muster

A funeral mass was held at Christ the King Catholic Church April 12 for Henry "Hank" Pelz, 87 of Jacksonville, Fla. who died April 7 after being diagnosed with Leukemia only two weeks prior,



**Henry "Hank" Pelz**

Hank was born in Chicago, Ill. on July 12, 1934 and joined the US Navy at age 17 serving during the Korean conflict.

He retired from the military after 26 years of service. Following retirement from the Navy, he worked in civil service for 10 years, and then started his own business in transportation.

Hank was a dedicated servant of the Catholic Church, attending mass

on a daily basis and sharing his time among Assumption, Christ the King, and Resurrection parishes. He was a Eucharistic Minister, lector and money counter at Christ the King.

Hank was an avid square dancer for over 45 years which allowed him to foster numerous friendships and also meet his wife Julie. He was a member of the American Legion and Fleet Reserve Association where he held several leadership roles.

He was active in the Knights of Columbus, volunteered for many years at Memorial Hospital.

Hank is survived by his wife Julie and his son, Stan of Longwood, Fla.

Interment was at Greenlawn Cemetery under the direction of Corey-Kerlin Funeral Home. A Celebration of Life was held at the American Legion Hall

Donations may be made to Christ the King Church, Community Hospice or Pro Life Organizations.

---

## Laffey, From Page 5

She operated in Hawaiian waters until departing for Australia on 1 May. Laffey returned to San Diego on 17 June, was decommissioned on 30 June 1947, and entered the Pacific Reserve Fleet.

The Laffey was recommissioned on 26 January 1951, with Commander Charles Holovak in command. After shakedown out of San Diego, she headed for the east coast of the US,

arriving at Norfolk in February for overhaul followed by refresher training at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. In mid January 1952, she sailed for Korea, arriving in March. Laffey operated with TF 77 screening carriers Antietam and Valley Forge.

In May, with Captain Henry J. Conger in command, Laffey she took part in the blockade of Wonsan in Korea.

Although frequently subjected to hostile fire in Wonsan Harbor while

**See Next Page**

embarked in his flagship, the Laffey, Captain Conger conducted a series of daring counterbattery duels with the enemy and was greatly instrumental in the success achieved by his ship.

By his inspiring leadership, sound judgment and zealous devotion to duty throughout, Captain Conger contributed materially to the success of the Naval blockade of the east coast of Korea and upheld the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

Laffey operated in the Caribbean with a hunter-killer group until February 1954, departing on a world cruise which included a tour off Korea until 29 June. Laffey departed the Far East bound for the east coast via the Suez Canal; she then participated in fleet exercises and plane guard duties and on 7 October rescued four passengers from Able, a schooner that had sunk in a storm off the Virginia Capes.

During the first part of 1955, Laffey participated in extensive antisubmarine exercises, visiting: Halifax, Nova Scotia; New York City; Miami; and ports in the Caribbean. In 1958, she operated with ASW carriers in Floridian and Caribbean waters.

On 7 November 1956, Laffey departed Norfolk and headed for the Mediterranean at the height of the Suez Crisis. Upon arrival, she joined the 6th Fleet which was patrolling the Israeli-Egyptian border. Returning to Norfolk the next month, Laffey resumed regular operations until 7 August 1959, when she deployed with DesRon 32 for the Mediterranean.

Laffey transited the Suez Canal on

14 December, stopped at Massawa, Eritrea, and continued on to the Aramco loading port of Ras Tanura, Saudi Arabia, where she spent Christmas. Laffey operated in the Persian Gulf until late January 1960, when she transited the Suez Canal and headed for home, arriving at Norfolk on 28 February. Laffey then operated out of Norfolk, making a Caribbean cruise. In mid-August, she participated in a large naval NATO exercise. In October, she visited Antwerp, Belgium, returning to Norfolk on 20 October, but headed back to the Mediterranean in January 1961.

Laffey was decommissioned and stricken on 9 March 1975. She was the last of the Sumner class destroyers to be decommissioned.

**Postscript:** In October 2008, it was discovered that over 100 leaks had sprung up in Laffey's hull and officials at Patriots Point were afraid that the ship would sink at her mooring.

An estimated \$9 million was needed to tow the ship to dry dock for repairs, prompting Patriots Point officials to secure a \$9.2 million loan from the state of South Carolina to cover the costs.

On 19 August 2009, she was towed to Detyens Shipyards[ in North Charleston on the Cooper River for repair in drydock

The rust-eaten, corroded hull was repaired with thicker plating, miles of welding, and new paint. Laffey was returned to Patriots Point on 25 January 2012 with more than a dozen former crew members among the crowd on hand to greet her.

# Membership Renewal Form

Due to changes in the structure of our organization shipmates need to be aware of whether or not they have renewed membership. Our membership is based on a regular calendar year. If the year “21, 22 or greater or L), etc. after your name on the newsletter mailing label does not reflect the upcoming **Reunion** year, you need to renew your membership.

This quarterly form will appear in the Winter and Spring issues of this newsletter and note that you need to renew your membership in the USS Allen M. Sumner Reunion Association. If you cannot afford the \$15, send what you can (if anything) as we will not deny a shipmate membership because of a hardship. And no one else needs to know.

For Sumner renewals, send to Pete Dromms, Reunion Association Treasurer at 301 Park Ln., North Syracuse, NY 13212-2143

Name_____ Spouse_____
Address_____
City_____ State_____ Zip_____
(A/C)_____ Primary Phone_____ Other Phone_____
E-Mail Address_____
Years on Sumner - From_____ To_____
Rate/Rank on Sumner_____
Retired from Navy (Yes/No)_____
Retired Rate or Rank _____
Other info you wish to share _____
Make Checks Payable to USS A.M. Sumner Association, 301 Park Ln., North Syracuse, NY 13212-2143



Newsletter Office  
3026 S. Cincinnati Ave.  
Tulsa, OK 74114  
(918) 743-2924  
Editor.....Don Hayden  
E-Mail: [editor@dd-692.com](mailto:editor@dd-692.com)



[www.dd-692.com](http://www.dd-692.com)  
Webmaster  
Ron Babuka  
[ron.babuka@cornell.edu](mailto:ron.babuka@cornell.edu)



If you are going to change your address (e-mail or physical), or no longer wish to receive the newsletter, let the editor and webmaster know.

---

Said one veteran, “This means a lot of years of fighting to get her saved again. The Germans tried to sink her. The Japanese tried to sink her and then she tried to sink herself sitting here. She’s whipped them all and she’s back again.”

It cost \$1.1 million to return the ship and to make repairs to accommodate her in a new berth at the front of the museum.

**Sumner Sentinel**  
**3026 S. Cincinnati Ave.**  
**Tulsa, OK 74114**