

Washburn During The War Years —The Boys At War—5

CS 9/8/11
James A. Kile, son of Mrs. Harriet Kile of Washburn, enlisted in the Navy in August 1942. He completed basic training at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station in February 1943 and was assigned as a fire controlman aboard a new destroyer, the USS Jenkins. When he was discharged from the Navy in October 1945, he had earned nine battle stars and other decorations. In an interview with the Times he described several actions in which his ship participated from June to November 1943 as part of the island hopping campaign directed toward the Japanese home islands. The purpose of this island hopping strategy was to capture certain key islands as bases for further operations, by-passing Japanese bases rather than engaging in numerous bloody battles to conquer them. Following is the first of two parts of Jim's interview.

"The first action seen by our destroyer was the bombardment of the Munda air base on the island of New Georgia. That was done by a destroyer and cruiser force about a month before the attack on Munda, which was late in June. The Japs put up no opposition to that bombardment. Our next action was on June 30 when the landings were made on New Georgia and Rendova Islands (in the Solomon Islands group). Our ship helped take the transports in and bombarded the Jap forces on the beach. The opposition from shore batteries and Jap torpedo



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planes was plenty strong. The torpedo planes came at our ship in droves and the force shot down 20 in all.

"A few days later we bombarded a section of the beach and jungle where our Army had pushed some of the Japs into a pocket. We fired about 1,000 rounds of anti-personnel shells, that explode at tree top level and spray the enemy troops with fragments of steel. On the next night, July 5, our destroyer was back at its base refueling when air reconnaissance picked up a large force of Jap ships coming down to re-enforce and supply their men on New Georgia. We finished fueling and high-tailed out of there in a hurry. We were hitting 30 knots by the time we cleared the harbor. At about 2 a.m. we contacted the Jap force and the battle of Kula Gulf followed. We lost the cruiser, USS Helena, in that fracas but the Japs lost nine ships, destroyers and cruisers, confirmed losses. (The Helena quickly sank after

being struck by three torpedoes.)

"It was pitch black that night. You actually couldn't see your hand in front of you. Because of the darkness and the fact that the Japs' detection devices are not so hot, our ship was able to go in pretty close on a torpedo run and launch three 'fish' at one of the Jap cruisers. A little later we saw the cruiser blow up and we figured it must have been our fish that did it. It's pretty hard to tell at night and in the confusion of a battle. Something must have hit the Jap cruiser's magazine. It blew to pieces with a crash that scared us even though we knew it was a Jap ship. Don't let anybody kid you we're not scared. I was scared stiff and so was everyone else. You get all screwed up tight inside and nobody says anything. They're too busy praying. Then the guns start and you feel better. And when its over and you've given the Japs another drubbing it's like New Year's Eve at the DuPont club—everybody laughing and hugging each other. (Kula Gulf is located between the islands of New Georgia and Kalomban-

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gara—the battle took place on the nights of July 5-6 1943).

"But it's not so good when you have some losses yourself. The idea is to skunk the enemy if possible and when he scores on you it dampens your enthusiasm over victory. We felt pretty low when we lost the Helena, even though we had outscored the Japs by a large margin. You get attached to ships when you see them near you every day and there was an awful vacancy sailing around with us after the Helena went down. About a week later our ship was in the enlarged American force that met another Jap force, also larger, in the second battle of Kula Gulf (night of July 12-13). There was moonlight that night and the Japs were able to put up stronger resistance. They damaged two or three of the American ships and sank one destroyer, but there were five Jap ships sunk, confirmed."

The survival and rescue of 732 of the Helena's 900 crewmen is one of the most incredible stories of the war in the Pacific.