

Washburn During The War Years — The Boys At War - 6

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This is part 2 of the Times interview with James A. Kile, continuing his description of his ship's participation in the second battle of Kula Gulf, during the night of July 12-13 1943.

"The moonlight made it too dangerous for us to run in close enough to the Japs to launch torpedoes. We almost got hit by two salvos from a Jap cruiser, one off our fantail and one off the bow. That second one threw up columns of water that drenched everybody on deck. Those near misses sprung some plates and made it necessary for us to go into drydock later at a South Pacific base. Incidentally, we were in drydock only 24 hours but during that time we scraped the bottom of our 'can' and applied three coats of paint. How's that for speed? Even the officers were down there slapping on paint!

"A few nights after the second battle of Kula Gulf, our ship was dispatched to Vella Lavella island to help rescue some of the survivors from the Helena, who had been spotted by American planes on this island that was then far inside Japanese controlled waters. An old fourstacker destroyer took along landing barges and took the Helena survivors off the beach while our ship 'screened' the operation and prowled around looking for trouble.

"On the way back next morning we picked up three



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Japs in an American lifeboat. They were also apparently survivors of the Kula Gulf affair, who had found one of the boats left by the Americans for possible survivors of the Helena. They squatted on their heels on deck and talked between themselves and didn't pay much attention to anything. We turned them over to the Marines.

"After the rescue of the Helena survivors, our 'can' was engaged in routine operations in connection with landings on Vella Lavella and Kolombangara. (Vella Lavella lies northwest of Kolombangara—landings were made in mid-October 1943.) We also kept busy defeating the Japs' efforts to evacuate their men in landing barges. One destroyer in the group 'knocked off' 43 Jap landing barges in one night. During this period, our ship was the object of frequent air attacks. It never suffered a

direct hit but experienced some 'near misses' that didn't do its plates any good. These 'near misses' occurred when several Jap planes were mistaken for American planes and were not watched closely enough.

"Our destroyer was then sent southward into relatively safe waters and cruised around in battle maneuvers for a time. The next big action it participated in was the attack on the Gilbert Islands in November. We stayed far offshore and helped screen the carriers while battleships and cruisers bombarded the Japs on Tarawa. I learned later that at least two other Washburnites were in that engagement, Chet Sanger and Charles Schultz were on one of the battleships that participated in the bombardment. (Tarawa Atoll is located in the Gilbert Islands—landings were made on November 20 1943—fierce Japanese resistance caused heavy US casualties before the atoll was secured on November 23.)

"Figures can't be quoted, but we had enough carriers in that attack to make your eyes pop. Our fighter planes held off the enemy during the day but the Jap torpedo planes came in low over the water at night. That was where we lost the Liscombe Bay, a tanker converted into a carrier.

"After the Gilbert affair a selected group of the carri-

er task force went into the Marshall Islands and blasted the Jap bases there. (Bombardment of the Japanese bases in the Marshall Islands was a prelude to landings, beginning in January 1944 on Kwajalein, Eniwetok and other atolls.) For some reason the Japs never spotted us on the way in and we caught them flat-footed. Over the wireless we could hear our pilots talking to each other as they pressed home attacks on the Jap ships. It was fun hearing them say 'You take that one and I'll take the other!' or 'Boy, look at that baby burn!' They sure punished the Japs. We had been lucky on the way in but coming out of the Marshalls we were under Jap air attack for 22 hours. The Japs concentrate on torpedo bombers and don't use may dive bombers. They don't press home attacks like they used to. They start in and then swing away time after time. They're not quite so suicidally-inclined as they were, I guess."

When Jim was discharged from the Navy in October 1945, he returned to Washburn and opened the Rainbow Grill, later moving to Oshkosh, where he earned a degree in education at Oshkosh State Teachers College, and opened a restaurant on campus.