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Brilliant at the Basics of Our Profession – An Example from our History



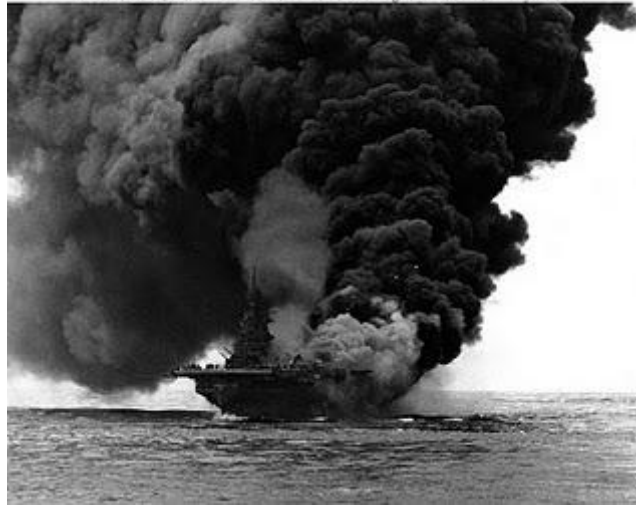
How well do you know your ship?
How well do you know your gear?
How well do you know yourself?

On 11 May 1945 USS BUNKER HILL (CV17), one of the new ESSEX class fast carriers around which the post-Pearl Harbor Navy was built, was sailing as the flagship of VADM Marc Mitscher's Task Force 58 during the Okinawa campaign.

The Marines and Army went ashore on Okinawa on 1 April 1945 in what became the most costly and bloodiest campaign in the Pacific War. It is the only battle in which more Navy Sailors died at sea than either the soldiers or Marines ashore. This very high number of casualties at sea was due primarily to the kamikazes, Japanese suicide planes, whose attacks on the fleet reached a crescendo during the Okinawa campaign.

Two kamikazes, each armed with a 500lb bomb, hit BUNKER HILL while she was preparing for flight operations on the morning of 11 May. The combination of bomb hits and crashes on the flight deck, filled with fully armed and fueled aircraft preparing for launch, was devastating. Structural damage to the ship was extensive and fires raged out of control on the flight deck, gallery deck, and in the hangar bay. Smoke and poisonous fumes spread rapidly through the ship. Damage control fittings were destroyed and fire fighting systems failed. The situation was truly desperate with the ship's survival in doubt.

Photo # 80-G-274266 - USS Bunker Hill afire following Kamikaze hits, 11 May 1945



A critical design flaw in the ESSEX class – the ventilation intakes were located along the flight deck and fed the central air ducts to the engineering spaces – resulted in the BUNKER HILL’s fire rooms and engine rooms rapidly filling with smoke and deadly fumes. The normal 110F ambient temperature rapidly spiked to 145-150F. The air became poisonous and filled with soot; visibility in the fire rooms dropped to near zero.

FN George Thorne knew, as did all the Engineers, that if he abandoned his post in the forward fire room, the ship would lose power and any hope of saving her would be lost. The heat and foul air gradually overcame the rest of the watch in the forward fire room – they slowly asphyxiated. FN Thorne, unable to see his gauges and dials, placed his hands on his feed water and fuel oil pumps and sensed by the feel of the system – a combination of sound, vibration, and temperature – whether the pumps were operating properly. For over 10 hours, FN Thorne operated his fire room essentially alone and in the blind under steadily deteriorating conditions.

FN Thorne knew his ship’s survival depended upon him staying at this GQ station, even at the cost of his life. Because of his intimate knowledge of the ships boilers, feed water and fuel systems, he was able to maintain fires in BUNKER HILL’s forward boilers by himself and without lights. He knew his ship and he knew his gear.

How well do you know yours? Think about what it would take to do your job totally in the dark, under great stress and with your shipmates out of action. Think about the situation where your ship’s survival depends on you and your ability to maintain your watch in spite of the threat to your very survival.

On 11 May 1945, BUNKER HILL was filled with men like FN George Thorne. Despite grievous damage to the ship, the deaths of 393 shipmates and the wounding of almost 300 others, Thorn and his shipmates saved BUNKER HILL. They knew their ship, they knew their gear, and they were determined to fight, no matter what.