

10 Apr 10

Dear Jim,

We missed you at lunch  
yesterday.

The day was the 65<sup>th</sup>  
anniversary of Cash on MORRIS,  
and I mentioned 65<sup>th</sup> anniv. of  
Okinawa & my ship's fate.

The disclosure of 65<sup>th</sup> anniv.  
gives away my antiquity! Aah!

Best wishes - & smooth sailing to  
you & yours.



Bob Spiro

By Robert H. Spiro Jr.

## Life and death aboard a tin can

### The battle for Okinawa remembered

Friday, April 6, 1945, is a day emblazoned in my memory. Sixty years ago today, off Okinawa in the East China Sea, a Japanese kamikaze plane crashed into the port side of my destroyer (called by sailors a "tin can"), penetrating the hull and exploding on the starboard side of the ship, the USS Morris. The bow was almost severed from the ship, and the explosion was catastrophic. When it was over, 24 men were dead and 44 wounded, almost 30 percent of the ship's crew.

America and its allies had just landed 182,000 soldiers and Marines on the southwestern coast of Okinawa Gunto. I was on board as supply and disbursing officer, a lieutenant (junior grade) in my eighth Pacific campaign on Morris.

More than 2,528 ships descended on Okinawa in a final, devastating amphibious operation envisioned as the final onslaught before invading the Japanese home islands in October that same year.

I recall the tension aboard Morris on the eve of Easter Sunday. Before midnight, in pitch dark, Morris and ships nearby quietly moved forward to be ready for the pre-dawn landings. Dozens of destroyers were stationed about 14 miles offshore to intercept the expected attacks by swarms of desperate kamikaze

planes.

Friday, April 6 was the most momentous day in the history of Morris. This was no accident, for the admiral who commanded all Japanese forces in the East China Sea began his Operation Ten-Go in earnest. He had 699 aircraft, 355 of them kamikazes, available for April 6 and April 7. This was to be the first of 10 massed kamikaze onslaughts called kikusui.

Historian Samuel Eliot Morison noted that a Japanese plane, later identified as a "Kate," carrying either a heavy bomb or torpedo, crashed into the ship on the port side between the No. 1 and No. 2 guns, just above the main deck. Fires spread rapidly. The fire main forward was severed. Fire hoses had insufficient water to check the fire. Ammo magazines were flooded and electricity forward was connected.

I was at my battle station in the combat information center when it happened, with about a dozen shipmates, perhaps 20-30 feet from the explosion. We were knocked violently to the deck and the CIC engulfed in total darkness. We came to, dazed but uninjured, and dashed

out on deck to find total chaos, with dead and injured lying around with terrible damage to the forward half of the ship. We pulled the wounded to safety, administered first aid, manned fire hoses, organized rescue parties and tried to save the ship.

Another destroyer and a DE finally arrived alongside to help with the wounded and to fight fires. We thought that the ship would have to be abandoned, for ammunition was exploding, and the fire was fast spreading, a severe list of the ship to port was developing. But with the help of other ships and the heroic efforts of Morris' surviving crew, it was saved.

About midnight, some six or seven hours after having been struck, the after-action report states that Morris slowly limped into the nearby anchorage of Kerama Retto, "underway with port engine ahead one-third, starboard engine ahead two thirds, maneuvering with left rudder because of a large section of hull bent outboard on starboard side—at a speed of seven knots. Steering control in after steering with directions from bridge over JV circuit. Commenced pumping A-4 and A-6 to remove a 5 degree

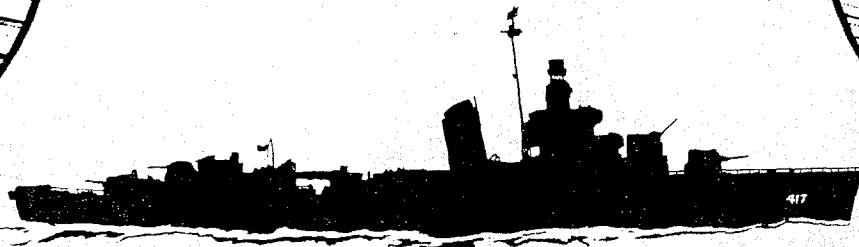
port list."

The repair officer at Kerama Retto recommended that Morris be towed to sea and sunk, because it was "junk." But during two months at anchorage, and by heroic efforts of the surviving crew, Morris was patched up and set sail. It took almost 30 days to return to port in San Francisco's Hunters Point on June 18.

American casualties were the highest of any campaign in the Pacific War: 49,151, including more than 12,000 killed or missing and more than 36,000 wounded. The Army alone suffered 4,482 killed and 19,099 wounded. Navy and Marine losses were high. The American fleet lost 36 ships sunk and 368 damaged. Japanese losses were staggering, with approximately 110,000 combatants and service troops killed. And more than 42,000 Okinawans perished.

Following the carnage, President Truman ordered two atomic bombs, and the war was ended.

*Retired Rear Admiral Robert H. Spiro, Jr., was a supply and disbursing officer aboard the USS Morris.*



# U.S.S. MORRIS DD417



Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal

- ★ Battle of the Coral Sea  
*4-8 May, 1942*
- ★ Battle of Midway  
*3-6 June, 1942*
- ★ Buin-Faisi-Tonolai Raid  
*5 Oct., 1942*
- ★ Battle of Santa Cruz  
*26 Oct., 1942*
- ★ Guadalcanal (3rd Savo)  
*12-15 Nov., 1942*
- ★ Rennel Island  
*29-30 Jan., 1943*
- ★ Southern Solomons  
*8 Feb. to 20 June, 1943*
- ★ Aleutians Operation  
*11 May to 2 June, 1943*
- ★ Gilbert Islands  
*13 Nov. to 8 Dec., 1943*
- ★ Marshall Islands Operations  
*1943-1944*
- ★ Asiatic-Pacific Raids  
*30 Mar. to 1 April, 1944*
- ★ Western New Guinea Operations  
*17 May to 15 Sept., 1944*
- ★ Leyte Landings, Philippines  
*10 Oct. to 29 Nov., 1944*
- ★ Lingayen Gulf, Philippines  
*4-18 Jan., 1945*
- ★ Okinawa Gunto Operation  
*24 Mar. to 30 June, 1945*

# WW II Kate Tactic Like New Exocet

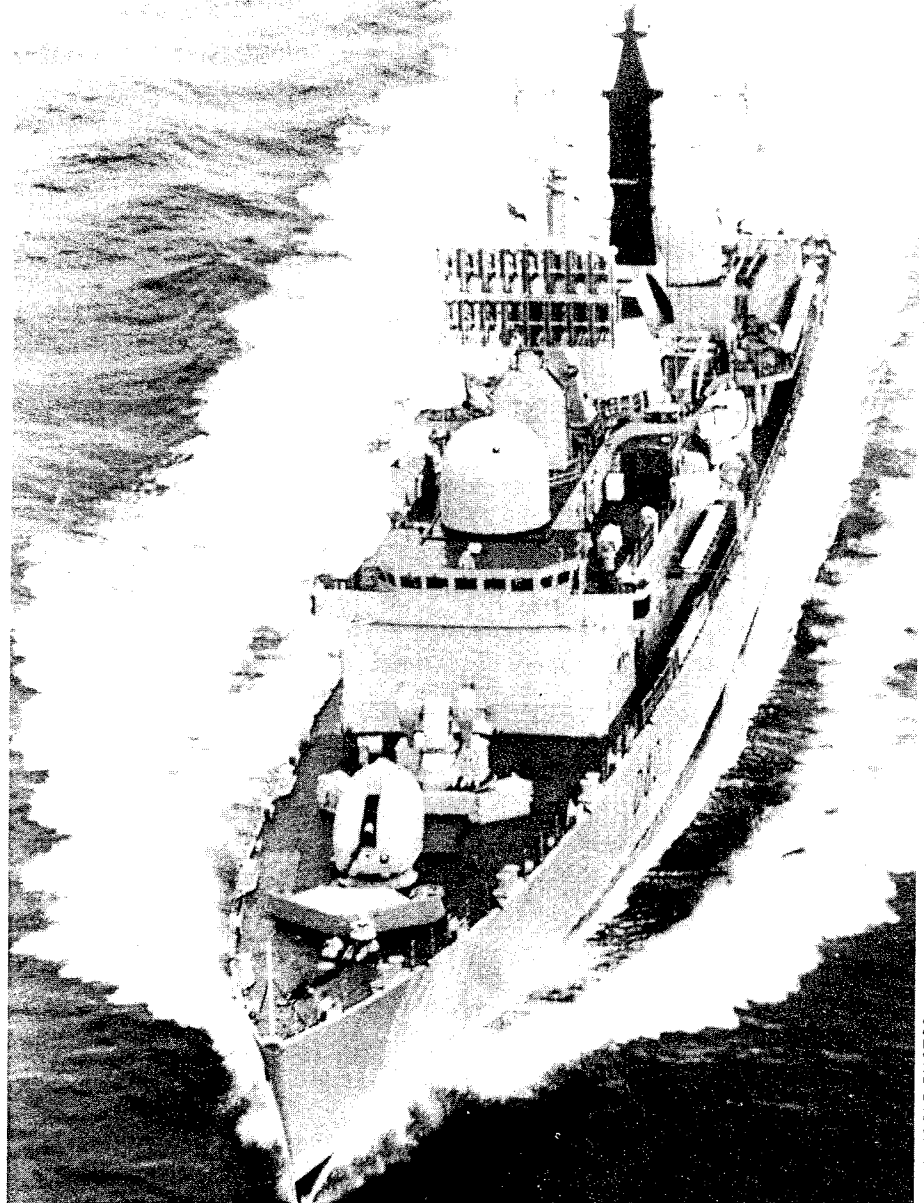
*HMS Sheffield and USS Morris: 1982 and 1945*

*The HMS Sheffield (top) was sunk during the Falkland Islands battle after being hit by an Exocet missile. How the USS Morris (below) survived an amazingly similar episode by a Japanese Kate bomber during World War II is told by the author.*

By RAdm. Robert H. Spiro, Jr., USNR (Ret.)

**T**he impossible happened early in May of this year. HMS Sheffield, a modern British destroyer of 4,100 tons displacement, was struck a devastating and fatal blow by a French-made Exocet missile. The place: the frigid South Atlantic Ocean a few miles off the Falkland Islands. The mission: the ship was riding the picket line, providing radar protection for the larger, more valuable HMS Hermes, an aircraft carrier. The enemy: an Argentine warplane, which launched the missile. The problem: Sheffield was without adequate protection, for Britain recently scrapped (for reasons of economy) her last full-size carrier, HMS Ark Royal, thus leaving British ships like Sheffield "blind"—without adequate "eyes" and without proper protection.

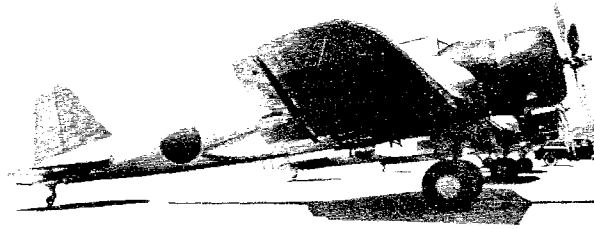
Capt. Sam Salt, RN, skipper of Sheffield, described the missile: "It came in at six feet above the water level, damaged two large compartments, and, when inside the ship, exploded outwards and upwards. We only had time to say, 'Take cover'. Three or four seconds later the missile hit, traveling at hundreds of miles per hour." Within seconds, the center of the ship was filled with black, acrid, pungent smoke. "We suddenly exploded, the whole ship seemed on fire. We couldn't breathe



WIDE WORLD PHOTOS



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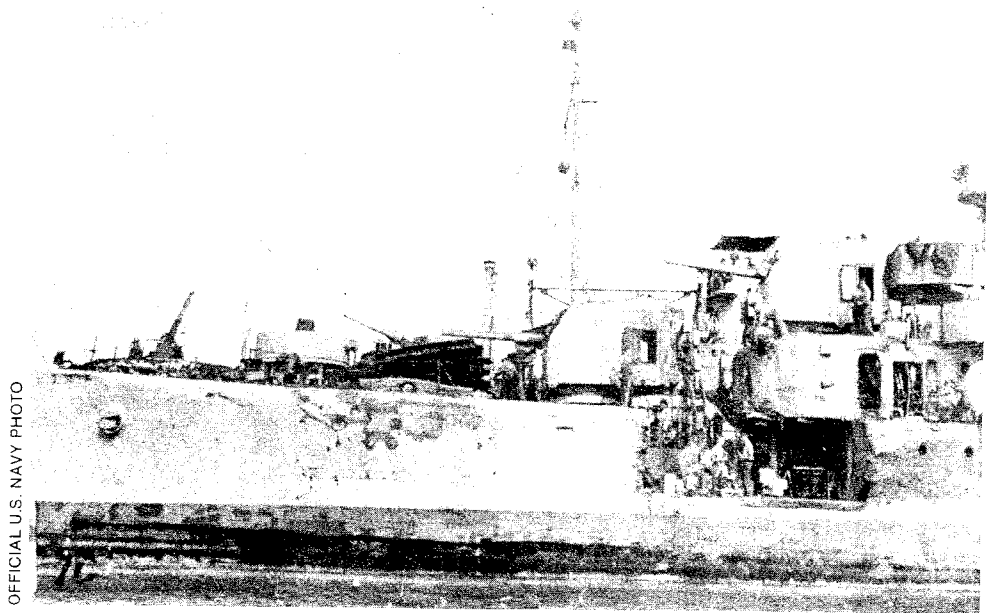
*In attack on USS Morris, Kate aircraft (left), carrying torpedo or bomb, came in on surface and struck just above the waterline as picture (below) shows.*

for the smoke, we couldn't see. Parts of the hull were white-hot." Fires threatened the ammunition lockers. Quickly there was no pressure in the firehoses, and power was lost, both electric and propulsion. Five hours later the captain gave the order to abandon ship. Of the ship's complement of 270 officers and men, as many as 20 died and 24 were wounded.

This drama of sea warfare brought to mind an amazingly similar episode 37 years ago. The place: the East China Sea, just off Okinawa. The date: 6 April 1945. The ship: USS Morris, DD417, flagship of Destroyer Squadron Two. The mission: radar picket duty, to intercept Japanese Kamikaze and other planes, thus protecting American landing zones on Okinawa.

American soldiers and marines had just been landed by the Navy on Okinawa, on Easter Sunday, 1 April. The Japanese had responded violently, as they had consistently reacted since the Leyte landings six months earlier, by repeated suicide attacks on the U.S. Fleet. Morris, which had assisted in the pre-dawn pre-landing bombardment by elements of the Fifth Fleet, was then assigned to radar picket duty. Six destroyers and destroyer-escorts were placed in each vulnerable sector to defend against waves of Kamikaze planes which swept down on American transport and landing ships as they disgorged men and supplies.

Morris, which had served on the bitter pre-war North Atlantic Patrol, early moved through the Panama Canal to the Pacific, and fought in 32 sea battles, earning 15 battle stars. At Coral Sea she went alongside the exploding Lexington to rescue 500 sailors, took another 500 off Yorktown at Midway, and still another 550 off Hornet at Santa Cruz. Guadalcanal, the Solomons, the Aleutians, Tarawa, Kwajalein, Eniwetok, Palau, Ulithi, Hollandia, Biak, Leyte, Lingayen Gulf . . . these and many more were Morris's battles. I was a very young ensign aboard Morris at the time. My battle station was the Combat Information Center, where I stood coding duty.



OFFICIAL U.S. NAVY PHOTO

By Friday afternoon, 6 April—six days after the initial landings—Morris's five companions on radar warning duty had all been sunk or damaged. We were alone. A Sims-class destroyer, displacing only 1,570 tons (Sheffield at 4,100 tons was almost the size of a WW II light cruiser), Morris was shaped like a slender cigar: 347 feet long, 35 feet abeam, she was rated at 37 knots and was very top heavy, carrying four five-inch calibre dual purpose guns, eight twenty-one-inch torpedo tubes, plus assorted 40 and 20mm anti aircraft guns. Her complement was 26 officers and 200 men.

As the early April sun was setting over the Asian mainland, the skydome was bright and almost cloudless, the ocean blue and shimmering. We had been at general quarters for almost a solid week, and the ship's company, to a man, were exhausted.

It appeared we had survived another day. But just after 1800 our radar picked up the faint signal of a hostile plane. Invisible to the eye, the dot on the screen was a Japanese aircraft, circling on the horizon. He apparently spotted us just as we located him, and he began flying directly at us out of the sun.



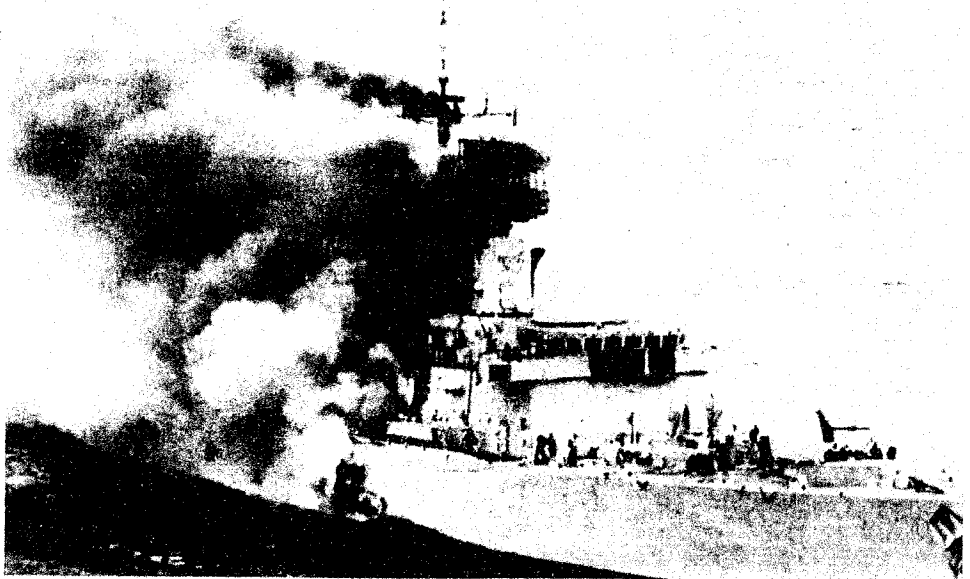
OFFICIAL U.S. NAVY PHOTO

To our surprise, he did not fly high and seek to glide down on us. Rather, he came in right on the surface of the sea, literally hopping the waves as he homed in on Morris. We were all alone in our world, he and we—he the determined pursuer, we the desperate quarry. It was futile to fire at him until he came within range of our main battery, but we opened up on him early, perhaps at five or six thousand yards. It was almost impossible

Argentina attacked HMS Sheffield (below) with French-built Super Etandard, equipped with Exocet missile (far right). Picture was taken during 1975 Paris Air Show.

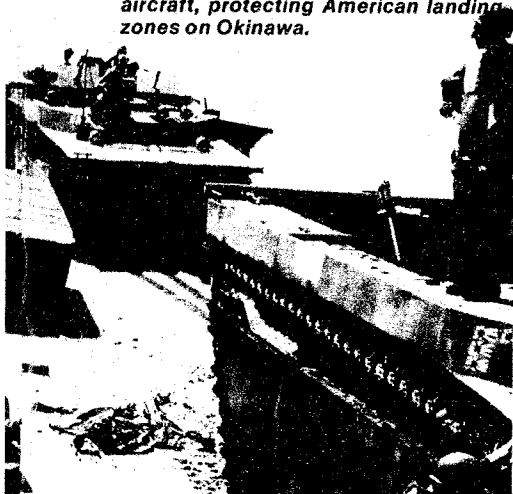


WIDE WORLD PHOTOS



WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Mission of USS Morris was to intercept Japanese Kamikaze and other aircraft, protecting American landing zones on Okinawa.



to train down our main battery and hit a speedy target dancing on the spray of a moderate sea. But we fired furiously, incredibly getting off more than 100 five-inch rounds in a minute and one-half. Then we opened up with the 40s at 2,000 yards, and the 20s at 1,000 yards. He drove relentlessly in—we identified him to be a Japanese "Kate," a dive bomber. He seemed at the very last to trail smoke, but he was not to be deterred.

Our captain took evasive action, frantically throttling full speed, turning radically to starboard at 31 knots. But as we turned right, "Kate" simply moved to left and bore in at close to 200 knots. We were fighting alone against a man determined to die. At the very end we emptied our Colt 45s at him and some said later that they threw potatoes at our tormentor.

Our "missile," the Japanese "Kate," carrying a torpedo or bomb, crashed into Morris's midriff at full throttle, striking just above the waterline amidships. The plane's wings sheared off (I still have a small remnant of the wing's skin), while the engine and explosive device—and possibly the body of the pilot—hurtled through Morris, penetrating the one-quarter inch steel plates of the vulnerable "tin can" as easily as a human finger may penetrate tissue paper. The plane thus entered the ship's portside, yet the explosion blasted the interior and the starboard deck areas, devastating small groups of men exposed in damage control crews, gunners, deckhands, staff and bridge personnel.

As with Sheffield later, the stricken Morris quivered, exploded, and instantly became a terrifying inferno. Smoke and flame billowed up, white-

hot plates of steel bowed and cracked, the exposed bowels of the ship boiled and surged. Many men were blown clear of the ship, others lay mangled and screaming. Encapsulated in the Combat Information Center, no more than 25 feet from the missile's impact, I found myself lying face down on the deck, stunned and shocked. I recall groping for my hands and feet, for I had often heard that limless men in shock would try to stand. Dazed but intact, I quickly rose and found my way outside to fight fire, to administer morphine syrettes to the wounded, somehow seeking to cope with the horrible conflagration.

Captain Salt of Sheffield, still in shock after losing his ship, could have been describing the destruction of USS Morris 37 years ago, almost in every gory detail. For two hours intense fires raged throughout the forward areas of the ship, fed by gasoline from the crashed plane and powder exploding in Morris's magazines and handling rooms. Entire areas of the ship had disappeared, including the officers' wardroom and several small staterooms, including my own. With the assistance of USS D. T. Griffin (APD 38) and USS R. P. Leary (DD 464), the fires were finally subdued and the wounded removed for treatment. We actually started to abandon ship, but our indomitable captain, Cdr. Rexford V. Wheeler, thought we could save it, and save it we did.

Despite a list of 17 degrees and heavy flooding, and despite the very real fear that Morris would lose its bow, the battered ship after seven hours staggered slowly into anchorage in a tiny archipelago called Kerama Retto, where she hovered for the next 51 days, undergoing daily air attacks (both suicide and bombing) until primitive repairs made the trip back to San Francisco possible.

Like Sheffield, which suffered perhaps 20 killed and 24 wounded, Morris (with a complement of only 226) lost 30 per cent of her crew—24 killed and 44 wounded.

Debate will doubtless ensue: if one modern missile can sink one modern destroyer—in 1982 as in 1945—what is the future of ships at sea? One fact is certain: ships are vulnerable to missiles, and must not be exposed without adequate carrier-based air protection.

Morris was all alone on radar picket duty—alone on watch. And like Sheffield, a generation later in the South Atlantic, Morris lacked proper protection. She had no far-seeing "eyes," which roving carrier aircraft can so adequately provide.