

DECEMBER 2013



# Elsie Item

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE  
USS LANDING CRAFT, INFANTRY, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION, INC.  
• Established May 14-18, 1991, Norfolk, VA •

**ANOTHER GREAT REUNION!  
LCI Shipmates and Family Gather  
Again in Branson**



USS LCI NATIONAL ASSOCIATION  
BRANSON, MISSOURI - SEPTEMBER 26, 2013

## On Our Cover

Eighty-two LCI shipmates, their wives and other family members gather again for a great time of reminiscing, remembering and enjoying the great scenery and attractions of Branson, Missouri. See more pictures and read all about it in the pages of this issue of *Elsie Item*. (Permission to use copyright photo granted by **Flash Photo**, Branson, MO.)



### **"THE ELSIE ITEM"**

**NUMBER 84, December 2013**

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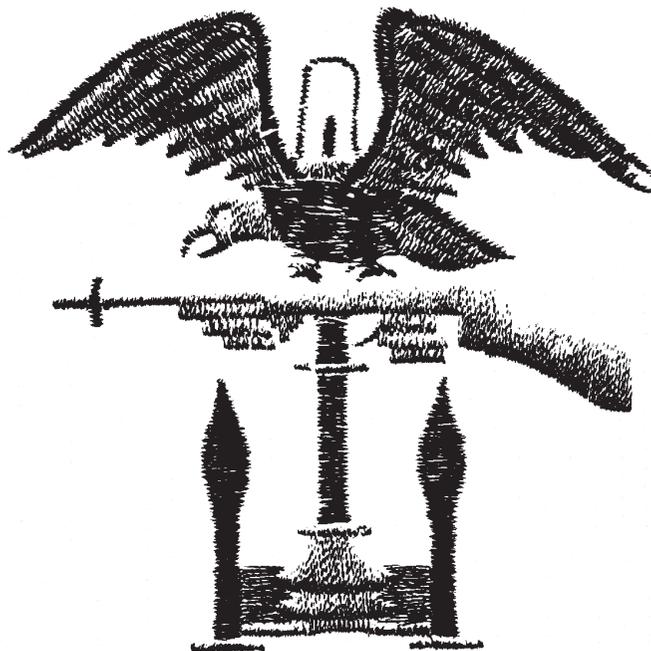
# A Word from the Outgoing Editor!

"And that's thirty! Old newspaper writers used to put those words at the end of each article so I think I'll use them here to let you all know that, with this issue, I'm relinquishing the great privilege of editing this newsletter to a bright, committed, talented young man named **Zach Morris**, whose writings you have already enjoyed in past issues. Go back and read some of those back issues if you want to know more about him. Suffice it to say that he has shown a great heart for all LCLers growing out of his love and admiration for his grandfather who sailed with us. You'll see ample evidence of his dedication and talent in coming issues. Zach and incoming President **Mike Gatton** have asked me to contribute a column in coming issues and that will be a great privilege for me.

It's been great – and with the support and loyalty of all old LCLers and an enthusiastic group of "youngsters" we know there are still great days ahead for this publication and our association.

And that's thirty!

*John Cummer*



# A Glimpse at the the Branson Reunion



*Treasurer Hal Bleyl and Jim Hale, LCI 455, welcome LSMer Ray Olley. Ray liked the company of LClers so well that he decided to join us –in full uniform – at our reunion.*



*Missing ships and shipmates are remembered in a "Ceremony of Waters" at the Memorial Service.*

*The Branson Belle, a real, old-time stern wheeler*



*Outgoing President John Cumber and wife Patricia enjoy the train ride.*



*Larry Yeater, LCI(R) 34 shows off his daughter-in-law, Debi Miller, as he also shows that he can still fit into his uniform!*

# Hail and Farewell!

## Mike Gatton Relieves John Cummer as President



### ***The Gavel Passes!***

After serving as LCI Association President for eight years, **John Cummer** submitted his resignation and has been relieved by Board Member and Chaplain, **Mike Gatton**.

Cummer submitted his resignation to the board shortly before the annual Board meeting. Vice President **John France** assumed the role of President until the time of the Board meeting when Mike was nominated as the new president and John agreed to stay on as the nominee for Vice President. "One of the shortest presidencies on record!" joked France.

The nominations were unanimously adopted at the following business meeting of the Association. "It's been an honor to serve this Association, and I am delighted that the leadership is now assumed by a person with the dedication and ability of Mike Gatton," said Cummer. "We all know Mike well and have greatly admired his commitment to the Association."

This election of an associate member to the top leadership position marks a culmination of efforts for the younger members to take leadership. With enthusiasm and new ideas coming from these new leaders the future of the Association is assured, even though it may take different directions that it has when the membership was made up entirely of the now-aging LCIers who served during WWII.

# Back to Branson with Gusto!

## The 2013 USS LCI National Reunion

### A First Hand Report by Joe Flynn

For the second time, our LCIers held their reunion in Branson, MO. It was a great success just like the first. Forty LCIers were able to make it and brought along with them friends and families so that we had a total of 82 in attendance. The numbers were down from previous years, but what we lacked in numbers we made up in spirit. Attendees started arriving on Sunday to register early and get a head start on the entertainment and activities that abound in Branson.

The hospitality room opened on Monday featuring **Royal Wetzel**, cook from the LCI 70, serving his famous Pennsylvania baloney and cheese. Wetz bought the goodies with winnings from the 50-50 drawing he won last year's joint reunion with the LSMers at Charleston, SC.

On Tuesday morning a trainload of attendees had a chance to see some Missouri and Arkansas countryside and enjoy lunch aboard a real passenger train. That evening those booked for the Baldknobbers Jamboree received a pleasant surprise – admission fees were waived for veterans. A great show and the price was right.

Wednesday we were back afloat, aboard the *Branson Belle* on Table Rock Lake. It wasn't salt-water, and the boat was a paddle wheeler, but we were on a boat with fair winds and following seas.



**Bob Bansky, LCI 594, admires the tranquil waters of Table Rock Lake. Not quite the same as an LCI!**



**The Wetzel Kazoo Band in Action!**

We enjoyed great entertainment and good food. **Hal Bleyhl** got into the act by having his watch pick-pocketed by the magician entertainer!

Back on the beach it was liberty for all hands, and most of them took in a show by "SIX" a group of brothers who sang a cappella, and made up for the musical sounds with their own sound effects.

Along with all the fun and games the Association took care of some serious business. The Board of Directors met on Wednesday to discuss our future, our finances and to make nominations for President and Vice President. A good deal of planning was done to help make a smooth transition to leadership by the associate members. Treasurer Hal Bleyhl reviewed membership fees, donations, and sales of LCI books, caps, and clothing. Membership has been dwindling but the costs of administration and the printing and mailing costs do not diminish proportionally.

With the resignation of long-serving President **John Cummer**, considerable discussion was devoted to nominations for President and Vice President. After reviewing the options, Chaplain **Mike Gatton** agreed to accept the nomination for President and **John France** stated he would continue as Vice President. John Cummer agreed to continue editing the *Elsie Item* during the coming year while transiting to editorship by Associate Zach Morris. Zach has already researched

and written a number of articles for the *Elsie Item*. The one year transition is designed to give John a year to phase out and Zach a year to phase in. This should work well. John spent many years as a teacher and Zach is a willing and energetic student.

The business meeting for the full membership on Thursday was well attended with considerable discussion of the issues raised at the Board of Directors' meeting. Treasurer Bleyhl reviewed the Association finances and the need for an increase in dues. John Cummer made a report from the nominating committee, nominating Mike Gatton for President and John France for Vice president. The vote of the membership was unanimous.

It was also agreed to seek an umbrella organization for all amphibious associations, LCI, LSM, and LST. Members stated that while recognizing the necessity of joining forces with other groups it is critically important to maintain LCI identity. A Task Force will be established to seek such an alliance.

The need for a change in dues structure and amount was the subject of much discussion, and a vote on a proposed change was passed and sent to the Board of Directors for further review. Final results of those discussions will be published in the next issue of *Elsie Item*.

Our next reunion is scheduled for Portland, OR, home of the USS LCI (L) 713 sometime in September, 2014. That reunion, in view of the smaller number of members able to attend, will not have the services of Armed Forces Reunion, Inc., the Northwest Group of our association, will host the reunion, make the necessary plans for accommodations, etc. Further information will be provided as soon as possible. It will be a little less formal but just as much fun as all the other reunions. Maybe even more fun, because we will be able to go aboard the LCI 713!

The Memorial Service for shipmates lost in service and those who have sailed west since the last reunion was held in the early afternoon. Chaplain Mike Gatton once more directed a thoughtful and reverent memorial involving Board members and shipmates and family of those we honored. As the names were read, shipmates and family stood, and moved forward to add a portion of water to a large vase, whose water changed color as new water was added in honor of loved ones.

With Vice President John France presiding, the evening banquet began with the posting of the colors by the Junior Air Force ROTC color guard from Branson High School



Board Member **Jim Aydelotte** led us in the Pledge of Allegiance and; after introductions, the gathering enjoyed a delicious dinner. Following dinner the group joined in the traditional toasts to the Commander in Chief, to our departed shipmates, to the United States Navy and Coast Guard. Outgoing President John Cummer introduced Mike Gatton, our new President. Newly elected President Gatton then recognized past President Cummer for his long service and presented him with a clock with engraved tribute from the Association.

**Joe Flynn**, California director and Board member, recognized Cummer's efforts in developing *Elsie Item* into one of the best retired military publications in the country by presenting him with a special LCI pen which had been given to him by the late **Jim McCarthy** who served for many years as California State Director.

The banquet program featured one of our best speakers to date, Chaplain and President Mike Gatton, who gave a rousing presentation on attitude, and our greatest generation. The speech was energizing, educational, and enlightening and was followed by a standing ovation.

After dinner, the dance floor was well occupied by LCI sailors, family and friends. Later I asked our senior LCI sailor, **Jim Hale**, 95 years and going strong, if he had a chance to dance. He said, "Yes, I danced three times. Three lovely ladies asked me to dance and a sailor never turns down a chance to dance."

After breakfast we made our Friday farewell wishes of "Fair Winds and Following Seas," and see you in Portland!"

# ***Seen at the Reunion!***



***Joe and Gloria Flynn***



***Hal and Pat Bleyhl***



***Marvin and Lucy Rees Carpenter***



***Quentin and Wanda Faye Pearce***



***Harold and Lila Labbs***



***Richard and Marilyn Lavell  
(New members who signed up at the reunion!)***

# IN MEMORIAM

*“Almighty and eternal God, from whose love we cannot be parted, either by death or life;  
hear our prayers and thanksgiving for those whom we here remember.*

*Grant unto sorrowing family and shipmates the blessing of your peace that passes understanding.”*

**LCI 70**

James Phillips

**LCI 406**

Gerard M Dunn

**LCI 538**

John “Kelly” McBride



# A Word from Chaplain – and now President – Mike Sharing God's Blessings



Country music artist, Martina McBride asserts in one of her hit songs that “We have been blessed...” Indeed we have. This world is a beautiful place. Most of us have people who love us. Few, if any, of us got out of bed this morning wondering where we would find something to eat. All of life is a blessing.

Our possessions are blessings from God.

If you have food in the refrigerator and clothes on your back, a roof over your head and a place to sleep, you are richer than 75% of the world. If you can read a newspaper or a road map, you are more blessed than 2 billion people in the world who cannot read. The fact that you can attend church without fear of harassment or torture or death is a blessing that almost 3 billion people in the world do not enjoy.

Why was I born in the land of the free and the home of the brave? Why was I raised in a house I didn't buy by parents who cared for my needs? Why am I an American sitting comfortably in my living room rather than an Indian squatting in some rat infested alley of Calcutta? Why do good things happen to ordinary people? So much of life is a given. We have been blessed.

The sin of suburbanites is the illusion that our fine houses, our fancy cars, our elite life style, is a product of our own ingenuity and imagination. We did it our way. We worked for it, paid for it, earned it, deserved it, and now all we have to do is protect it from individuals or institutions who might dare to alter the wonderful life we have so carefully constructed.

The Bible sees things differently: “The earth is the Lord's and everything that is in it” (Psalm 24:1). “God owns the cattle on a thousand hills; the sun, the moon, and the stars are his” (Psalm 50:10). We are stewards and managers of what God has entrusted to us. The question on our final exam will be “What have we done with what we have been given?” Our possessions, whatever form they may take, are spiritual matters.

Even our problems are blessings from God.

Christian artist, Andrae Crouch survived four different forms of cancer. He was fond of saying, “I wouldn't want to wake up in the morning without saying thank You God for another day.” One of his songs goes like this:

I thank God for the mountains,  
I thank him for the valleys,  
I thank him for the storms, he brought me through.  
For if I never had a problem,  
I wouldn't know that God could solve them,  
I'd never know what faith in God could do.

Life is filled with problems. But, we learn more from our problems than we do from our successes. People sail through the good times, but dig deep wells in hard times. People walk by fact when they have it all together, but they walk by faith when life is falling apart. Helen Keller said, “I have always thought it would be a blessing if each person could be blind and deaf for a few days during their early life. The darkness would make them appreciate the light. The silence would teach them the joys of sound.” I thank God for the problems. God has used them in redemptive ways to make me a better person.

And, the possibilities that surround us are blessings from God.

A childhood song reminds us: “I am a promise, I am a possibility, I am a promise, with a capital P. I am a great big bundle of potentiality, And I am learning to hear God's voice, And I am trying to make the right choice, And I can be anything God wants me to be.” Do you understand the possibilities of your life?

We were born not to get, but to give. We have been blessed. Let's share God's blessings.

*Agape, Mike*

# LCIs in the "Graveyard of Ships"

By  
Robert Higgins

## ***An amazing find of rusted hulks of LCIs in a Staten Island "Graveyard of Ships"***

*Robert Higgins, a retired New York Police Supervisor whose father served aboard LCI 489 at Normandy, is himself a former Navy man (Electrician's Mate. His incessant curiosity about old ships led him to investigate a junkyard of ships on Staten Island where he came upon the remains of three LCIs. With the reluctant permission of the owners, Bob climbed in and around the somewhat dangerous ruins to get pictures. We are happy to give you this story in his own words and some of the pictures, which he sent.*



***The Staten Island "Graveyard of Ships" with the remains of three LCIs in the very center***

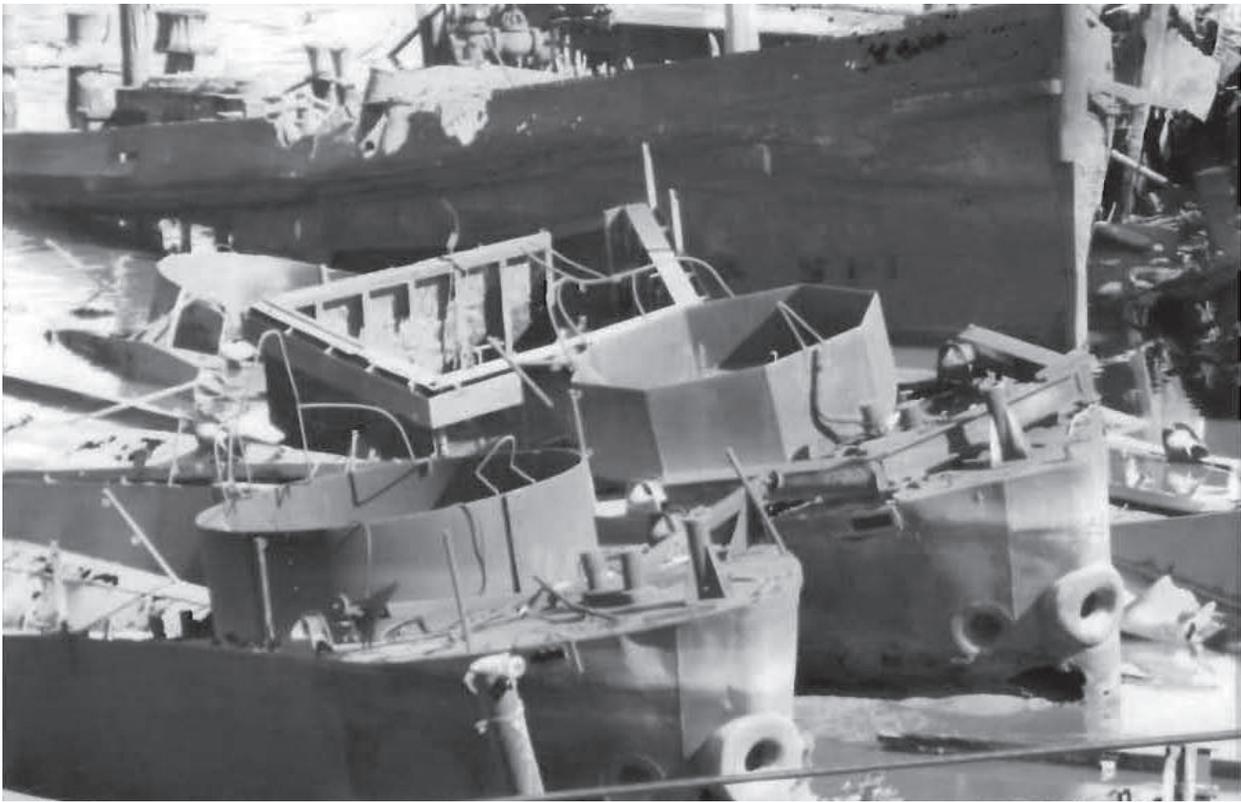
My father, **Robert C. Higgins**, was a man respected by everybody who enjoyed being with people and always did whatever he could to help anyone. He went to war in his senior year of high school and, like many others served his country throughout World War II. He served on LCI 489 at Omaha Beach on D-Day, June 6, 1944. My father never talked about his war time service, so I knew little about LCIs. After I learned what kind of a ship he served on, I did a bit of research and found that an LCI was only 153 feet long and sped along at the high speed of 11 knots!

In time I found out why he got a Christmas card every year after the war from his Captain. Dad died in 1975 and only told me of two other things about his WWII experiences. The first was when he

and two other men were put over the side to swim in the pre-dawn darkness to the beach to anchor a rope for the troops to hold onto as they struggled ashore. The ship retracted before he had a chance to re-board, so he and his buddies joined in with some army troops until they could get back to the ship. He eventually found his ship on Utah Beach and was glad to get back aboard.

My mother died in 2005 and it wasn't until 2010 that I went into their bedroom to find something. What I found was his log book of training in England, his D-Day experiences and photos of the entire crew and his ship. There were also photos of Omaha and Utah beaches in the days after the invasion.

What I read in his log did not sound like the



***The bows of two of the LCI hulks***

father I knew. He spoke of ships sinking all around his ship and of not being able to go to their assistance. He saw many floating dead and sea mines all over. He also wrote of the strong continuous fire raking the beach. All this had a lasting impression on him as anyone who has been in wars knows only too well.

Because of his log book and the photos in it I wanted to share it with any of his crew members who might be around. He thought he might find someone who would remember him. I found the LCI Association and went to a reunion to join and share. As time went by I found reports of other LCIs and eventually discovered the Armed Forces Memorial Reunion when they met in Portland, Oregon. I saw the LCI 713, went aboard and was able to see the engine room where my father had worked.

I asked the men who were working on the reconstruction of the 713 and learned that, among other things, they were looking for a coffee maker. A few months later I read of a 1941 year ship in the Staten Island Ship graveyard – a civilian one that had been used by the army as a supply ship and that was being sold piece by piece for the metal. I asked if the original of a coffee pot was still aboard but got no answer.

While I was there I took photos of the many old rusted ships. It seems that the owner himself purchased ships and had so many – over 600 at times – that the ships were being cut up for scrap metal. I saw that some of the ships had what looked like gun turrets. From net Google I learned three British ships – LCIs 112, 119, and 220 - had been sent there in February, 1948. The bows of two of these ships were in photos that I had taken years ago but did not know what they were.

It is dangerous getting near these hulks so a long-range camera is a must. It took many weeks and a lot of understanding and allowance by those in charge there for me to get these pictures. I was very thankful to a young woman who realized how much this meant to me.

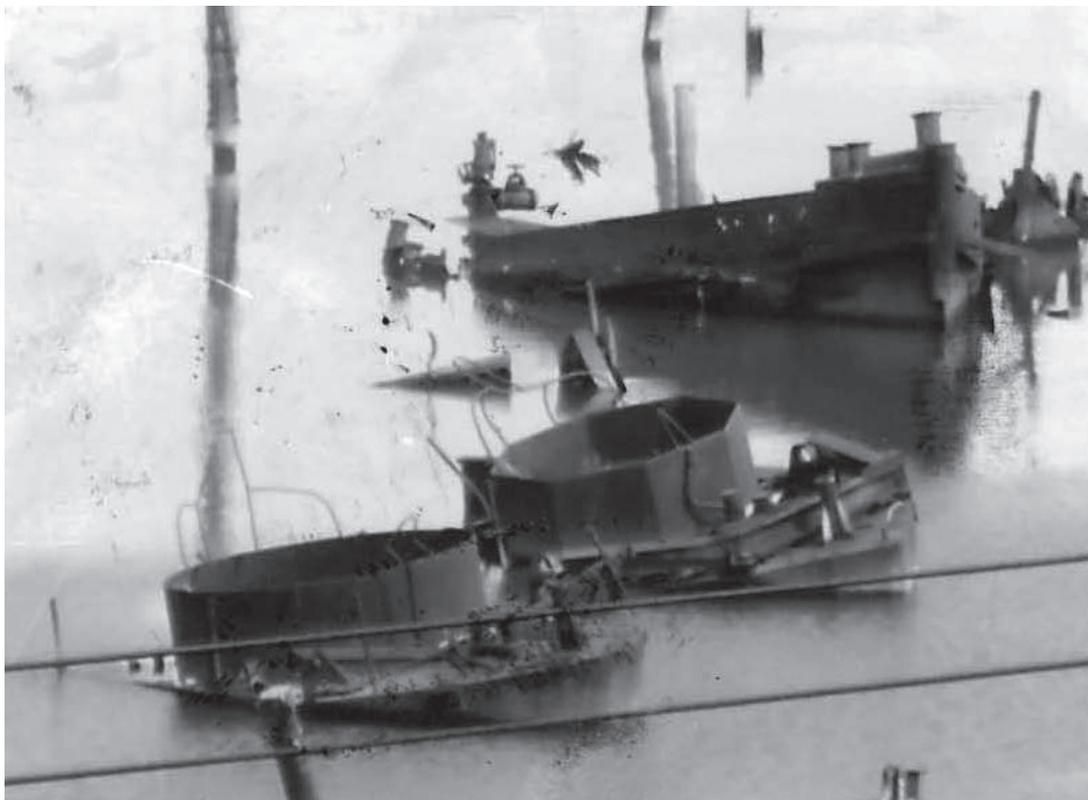
All of the first photos were taken at high tide. Some weeks later I got to view the ships from a higher spot. From that vantage point I saw a small object near the two bows. I had to find out what it was. I learned that a very low tide (a "moon" tide) was coming so that from my higher position I could find a "missing" LCI, one that had been lower in the mud and under water for most of the day. I went after it for more photos and found it was a rear gun turret from a flat-sided LCI. I later learned that this type of turret was put on only the first

100 LCIs built in the United Kingdom before American ship yards began turning out the more familiar round-conning version. I was unsuccessful in finding any photos of this type LCI from UK Royal Navy information sources.

The last of my photos were taken from on top of an empty building. I climbed up 5 floors to get these shots. The pictures I took from there show portions of the bridges of two of the LCIs. I believe that the only way to get better photos is by airplane since no ships or boats are allowed in the vicinity of this maritime junkyard.

Finding these ships has made me happy and I hope they will make others happy with remembering people who served on these and other LCIs, not only U.S. Navy veterans but also sailors of Great Britain's Royal Navy. I am proud and happy that finding my father's log book got me into this search.

In the name of my father and all LCI sailors of the U.S. and U.K. Navies, I dedicate these pictures with respect and thanks.



***The bows at high tide. Note the unusual angled gun-shield of the one LCI.***



***The distinctive square conning towers of two of the LCI hulks are seen here.***

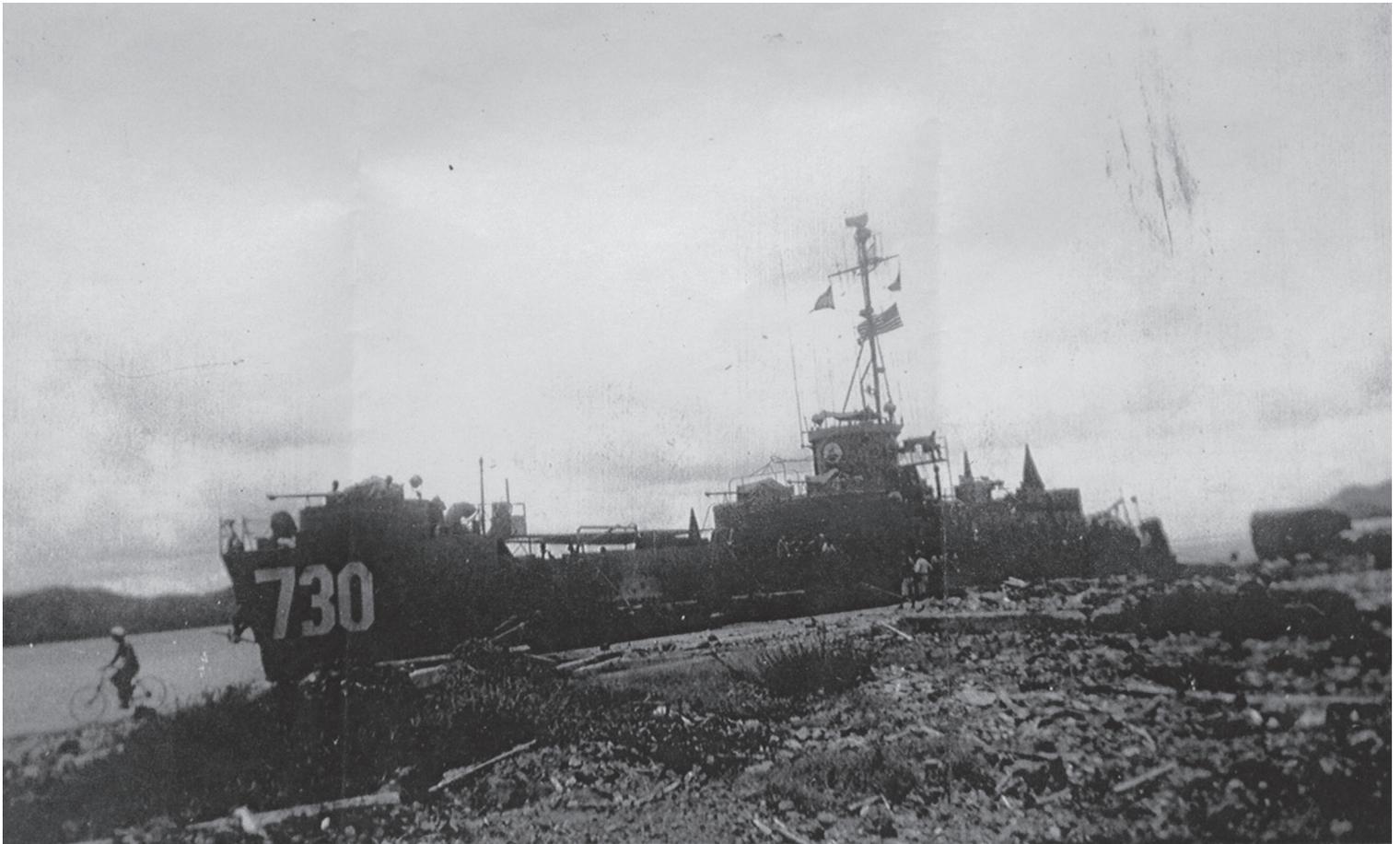
# HE WAS OUR COMMODORE AND WE WERE HIS MEN

## John H. Morrill, Dan Tolar, Harry T. Wilhoit, and Russell Packard aboard the LCI (G) 730: Flagship of the Black Cats – LCI Flotilla Thirteen

By Zach Morris

*The following is written from information found in the late Admiral John Morrill's book **The Cincinnati**, the incredible story of LCI Flotilla Thirteen, commonly referred to as the "Black Cat Flotilla," in the Pacific War. LCI (G) 730 veteran Radarman Dan Tolar provided input for "The Cincinnati," when John Morrill was originally writing it. I had*

*the privilege of interviewing Dan over the phone on several occasions. I was also provided input and documents from Tom Wilhoit and John Packard. Tom is the son of the late Harry T. Wilhoit, and John is the son of the late Russell A. Packard. Harry, Dan, and Russell were the three Radar operators aboard the LCI (G) 730.*



**The LCI (G) 730 docked in Malakal Harbor, Koror, Palau Islands. Japanese forces standing on shore can be seen surrendering to the Americans.**

*"Our officers and men had become Cincinnati – Citizen soldier, sailors. Like the ancient Cincinnatus, they were ready to go and fight for the defense of their native land."*

- John Morrill, "The Cincinnati" (67)

## **PART I**

### **John Morrill and the Black Cat Flotilla**

It was May of 1942. Hidden behind the sixteen-foot-thick concrete walls of the once-believed indestructible American base of Corregidor in Manila Bay, Philippine Islands, a newly-promoted Lieutenant Commander **John H. Morrill** found himself in a most dire situation. The Japanese forces now victoriously occupied the Philippines and, with no American help in sight, Morrill was under orders to surrender. With only a small window of opportunity to work with, Morrill did something unprecedented. He and seventeen of his men disobeyed orders, absconded into the night, and fled the Philippines under the cover of darkness in a small boat.

Morrill and his men eluded the enemy for thirty days, over a course of two thousand miles, before finally arriving safely in Australia. A significant feat like this had yet to be accomplished by the Americans at this point in the war. Upon hearing the news of his escape, the high command had Morrill immediately sent to their location in Washington DC, anxious to hear his feedback.

While in Washington, Morrill again did something unprecedented. Being an Annapolis Naval Academy graduate, he stunned the Detail Officer in the Bureau of Personnel when he requested duty commanding a flotilla of LCIs, rather than a more distinguished position commanding a cruiser or battleship. Morrill had unwaveringly volunteered without even knowing what an LCI looked like. But Morrill wanted to see action as soon as possible – and being aboard an LCI in the newly created Amphibious Force was, he felt, the best and quickest way. Despite objections from his friend **Count Austin** warning of the "misfits" he would be in charge of commanding, John Morrill reported for duty at the Naval Amphibious Base, Solomon's Island, Maryland, as commander of LCI Flotilla Thirteen.

Morrill had quite the task ahead of him. The brand new LCIs were not built to travel across the ocean and needed structural improvements, but lacked the proper parts and tools. They required heavier armament, but lacked the welding equipment and larger caliber guns. At this point in the war, LCIs had only been used to function in groups and were not designed to work independently. Most of the officers were fresh "90-day wonders" and the crews were neither sea-worthy nor tested in combat. They needed a leader to teach them how to fight.

Throughout the war, Morrill would continuously improve the LCIs of Flotilla Thirteen. He would ensure they were properly tooled and supplied with what they needed. He'd arm them and train its officers and crews to be ready to operate – both independently as well as together. Most importantly, he'd teach them how to master the art of war and survive the fight against the Japanese so that they could come back home. Morrill also made certain that his officers and crews would be subjected to the same severe draconian training as the Army's 81st Infantry Division. He would lead by personal example from aboard the Flagship of Flotilla Thirteen, the USS LCI (G) 730.

Morrill's unique leadership called for all officers and enlisted crewmen to help formulate strategies against the enemy as one unit, regardless of position or rating.

He would turn the Black Cats into warriors.

Commissioned on January 26, 1944, from Commercial Iron Works in Portland, Oregon, the LCI (G) 730 would acquire three very talented Radar operators over the course of the next five months. The first two operators reported aboard the same day on April 11, 1944 – **Dan Tolar** from Delhi, Louisiana and **Russell 'Deacon' Packard** from Utah. The third radar operator reported aboard almost two months later in June 1944 – **Harry T. Wilhoit Sr.**, from Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Retired LCI veteran Radarman Dan Tolar claimed responsibility for coming up with Russell Packard's nickname.

"I nicknamed him 'Deacon', because he was the only Mormon aboard the ship."

Arguably the best-trained division in the Army in the spring of 1944, the 81st Division was to train with LCI Flotilla Thirteen for potential scouting missions that would eventually take place on Kyushu, Japan.<sup>1</sup> San Luis Obispo, located off the coast of California, was chosen as appropriate terrain for the training exercises. The "Black Cats" from Flotilla Thirteen and the "Wildcats" from the 81st Army Division would train side by side for the upcoming Angaur Operation, which would reunite them later that year.

After assisting with the bloody recapture of Guam in the Mariana Islands in July 1944, the Black Cats would participate in the Palau Islands Campaign two months later, in September 1944. They would find themselves once again in company with their Wildcat comrades of the 81st Army Division. And like before, they would be conducting landings together.

Only this time, they would be conducting amphibious operations on a Japanese-held island.

The official name for the operation to take those islands was dubbed, Operation Stalemate II. Stalemate II called for the assault of the two southernmost islands of the Palau Islands. The LCI (G) 730 and the Black Cats would assist with taking Peleliu on D-Day and Angaur on Fox Day.

The 1st Marine Division invaded Peleliu on the morning of September 15, 1944. The blood from wave after wave of Marines covered Orange and White Beaches by the afternoon. The men of the Old Breed suffered inexcusably high casualties in their undaunted campaign to secure Peleliu.

By daybreak of Fox Day – September 17, 1944, the LCI (G) 730 would find itself suddenly, and all at once, immersed in the hellish cloud of smoke from the naval bombardment in the first assault waves of Angaur's Blue Beach. Commodore Morrill completely lost sight of his surroundings and the only sounds were that of thunderous artillery and

machine gun fire in every direction. He was just barely able to see the Wildcats boys of the 321st Regiment flashing them the V for victory sign as the first waves of the 81st Division passed in their charge to the landing beach. Pure chaos was all around the Flagship gunboat.

And then he heard it.

Despite being engulfed in a blinding blanket of smoke and surrounded by a deafening cacophony of showering steel, Morrill could make out the comforting voice of Radar operator Seaman First Class Harry Wilhoit, who was enunciating ranges and giving directions so calmly that one would think he was simply ordering items from a breakfast menu. Morrill was reassured in that moment that his men of the Black Cat Flotilla had no fear of battle.<sup>2</sup>

Radarman Dan Tolar described his friend Harry Wilhoit as a compassionate man. Harry had a wife and family back in Chattanooga, Tennessee that he would send his money to whenever the crew received their pay. Dan Tolar remembered, "When we had a payday the dice would roll and the cards came out for poker games. Harry did not gamble. He saved his money!"

As a result of their tireless and meticulous preplanning, the Black Cats made more professional use of the principles of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* than in any other battle in WWII. The leadership of Commodore Morrill, **Admiral Blandy**, and **Army General Mueller** was critical in helping the Army's 81st Division capture Angaur with as minimal casualties as possible.<sup>3</sup>

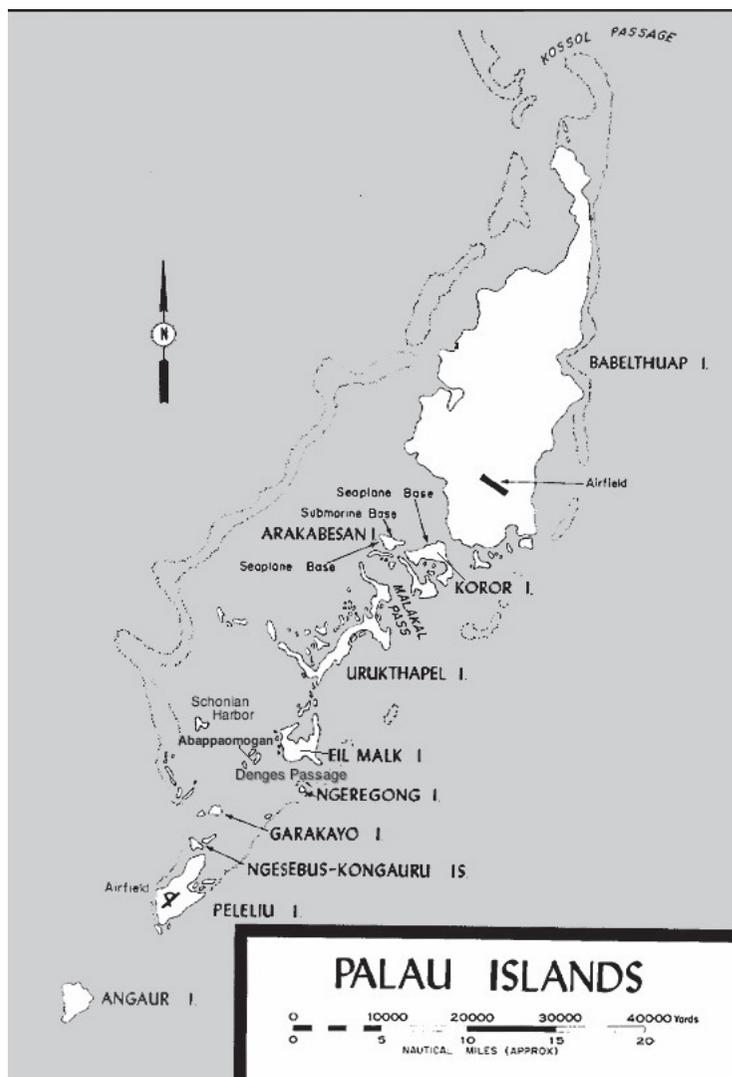
Meanwhile on Peleliu, savage and vicious fighting between Japanese and the Marines was still taking place. The Black Cats were ordered to cover the northern coast of Peleliu in order to prevent Japanese reinforcements from landing on the island. LCI Flotilla Thirteen's work in the Palau Islands had only just begun.

<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from *The Cincinnati* (Morrill, Chapters 1-6) <sup>2</sup> *The Cincinnati* (Morrill, 144) <sup>3</sup> *The Cincinnati* (Morrill, 143)

## PART II

### The Palau Operations

By October and November 1944, it was estimated that nearly 25,000 Japanese still inhabited the remaining Palau Islands that lay to the north of Peleliu. For the LCIs in Flotilla Thirteen the strategy in the Palau Islands changed primarily to patrolling, demolition, and minesweeping operations



Map courtesy of *HyperWar – Volume IV: Western Pacific Operations (some labels added)*  
<http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USMC/IV/USMC-IV-III-1.html>

Duties conducted in Schonian Harbor, located in the southern Palau Islands, came with an extreme amount of danger. One mine clearing incident worth noting, was when in the absence of an available minesweeper, eleven of the best swimmers aboard the LCI (G) 730 were chosen to swim in the harbor, approach and circle each mine, and essentially lasso each one with a three-inch manila

line (rope). Then, each mine would be physically hauled away from Denges Channel into shallower water using an LCVP (Bow Ramped Personnel Boat) the 730 had salvaged during the Peleliu assault, so they could be destroyed later.

Radarman Dan Tolar recalls the day he was chosen as one of the eleven swimmers:

“Eleven of us would swim around a mine, let that line go down, then we made a loop, and use an LCVP we stole to pull that mine to shallow water. We’d use a rifle to shoot them and set them off.”

Luckily, none of the mines detonated in the process of clearing them. The eleven swimmers and three-man crew on the LCVP completed the operation successfully.

Several nights later, the LCI (G) 730 would find itself face to face with one of its most perilous incidents of the war.

The waters of Schonian Harbor were dark and murky shortly before midnight on November 17, 1944. The moon and stars had completely abandoned the pitch-black overcast night sky. Radarman Russell ‘Deacon’ Packard had just awoken from his bunk and prepared for his 4-hour watch. It only took about a minute for Russ to get dressed, but in that minute, memories of his home in Salt Lake City flooded his mind. His thoughts were likely on his longing to be back home with his family again for Thanksgiving, when a voice from above suddenly broke the silence.

Seaman First Class **Robert “Eagle Eye” McNulty**, a young sailor with a personality that kept the crew laughing and eyes that were always the first to spot a target, could be heard shouting.

“I see something in the water!”

Several moments later there was more shouting. “Japanese boarding the ship!”

Russell rushed up the ladder and witnessed the scene around the ship. Two waves of about fifty Japanese swimmers emerged from the darkness. The enemy swimmers approached the Flagship alongside spherical mines with horns and rafts

loaded with ladders, explosives, bombs, and grappling hooks. Their intention was to board the LCI and destroy it.

The first wave that approached the bow (front) of the ship was composed of swimmers whose heads were completely bald in accordance with an ancient samurai tradition. The second wave of enemy swimmers approached the stern (back) of the Flagship. They had painted their entire bodies white in such a way as to represent human skeletons.<sup>4</sup> The Flagship began firing on the enemy swimmers. Only one survived the onslaught of machine gun fire unleashed from the LCI 730. Despite the enemy's attempts at adding a new element of psychological warfare against the Americans, their baldheads and white bodies actually made for easier targets.

Realizing the importance of taking this Japanese survivor prisoner, Morrill had the lone swimmer retrieved from the water. In a move that can only be described as the antithesis of the manner in which Japanese treated their prisoners of war during WWII, the crew of the LCI (G) 730 treated their sole surviving prisoner very friendly. The crew of the Flagship brought him clothing, food, and a cigarette. In a most unbiased move of affection, the ship's dog even jumped up onto the prisoner's lap while he was seated in the crew's mess room.<sup>5</sup>

The Japanese prisoner returned the unexpectedly kind treatment by helping the Flagship locate enemy positions on the remaining Palau Islands, including the nearby island of Abappaomogan, from where the enemy swimmers had come. However, the most surprising element of all was the Japanese prisoner revealed that he already knew Commodore John Morrill by name, along with the rest of the American commanders in the southern Palau Islands area. Since he spoke Japanese, the prisoner used sign language to assist with other various tasks before he was ultimately sent to Peleliu for further questioning.

"After that incident, they issued us all knives to carry on our person because of the swimmers," Dan Tolar affirmed.

This alarming event would prove to be only the beginning of the heavy fighting in the Palau Islands for the LCI (G) 730. In "The Cincinnati," Morrill stated:

*"From that night on until the end of the war, there was never a day, never a night, in which we and the enemy were not attacking each other."*<sup>6</sup>

Yet despite the dangers encountered in the treacherous waters of the Palau Islands, day-after-day and night-after-night, the Black Cats would ultimately prevail. On August 15, 1945, the Japanese government surrendered to the Allies. Fourteen days later, a group of Japanese officers on Koror Island (Northern Palau Islands) approached the USS LCI (G) 730 with official surrender documents. One of them approached Dan Tolar and began to speak. Dan was quite surprised to learn this particular Japanese officer could speak perfect English.

"He was from Japan, but he graduated from the University of Washington," Dan was able to learn. "He talked in English as good or better than I did. That's where he went to school. Then he went back and went in the service over there."

Radarman Dan Tolar left the LCI (G) 730 behind in San Diego in March 1946. The war for Dan, along with the rest of the Black Cat men of LCI Flotilla Thirteen had finally come to an end.

Dan Tolar and John Morrill remained friends long after the war.

More than 45 years after the war, retired RDM3c. Dan Tolar had the honor of presenting retired Admiral John Morrill with a key to the city of Delhi, Louisiana, on May 3, 1991, while Dan was serving as a local councilman for the city of Delhi.

Dan boasted, "I even got a picture of it!"

Several years later, with help and input from Dan and others, Morrill released his book detailing the story of the Black Cat Flotilla, *The Cincinnati*.

<sup>4</sup> *The Cincinnati* (Morrill, 184) <sup>5</sup> Excerpts from *The Cincinnati* (Morrill, Chapter 16) <sup>6</sup> *The Cincinnati* (Morrill, 186)



***Dan Tolar (right) presents John Morrill (left) with the key to the city of Delhi, Louisiana on May 3, 1991***

Retired Admiral John Morrill passed away in 1997.

Retired Radarman Russell Packard passed away on July 10, 2006. At his funeral many loved ones surrounded him, including his son **John Packard**, who gave a heartfelt eulogy reflecting his father's life experience.

Retired Radarman Harry T. Wilhoit passed away on November 21, 1972. He operated a service station for some 45 years and was owner of the Harry T. Wilhoit Gulf Service Station on McCallie Ave., Chattanooga, for the 15 years preceding his death.

Retired RDM3c. USN Dan Tolar currently lives in Delhi, Louisiana.

## **Noted Historian Consults LCI Archives**

**Dennis Blocker**, Pacific War Historian for the LCI Association is seeing his hard work in establishing the archives at the Nimitz Museum, Fredericksburg, Texas, pay off!

The archivists at the museum recently notified Dennis that **Dr. Craig Symonds**, Professor of History, Emeritus, U.S. Naval Academy, heard about the LCI Archives and flew in from the east coast to study them. They report that he stayed for two days copying information from our archives and was very happy with all he found. Dr. Symonds is writing a book scheduled to come out in August of 2014 about the amphibious landings at Normandy, France.

Our thanks and congratulations go out again to Dennis for all his hard work in collecting, analyzing, and categorizing thousands of pages of documents and personal stories from LCIers. On top of this, Dennis was responsible for making arrangements for the material to be archived in this first class museum. BRAVO ZULU, Dennis!

# USS LCI NATIONAL ASSOCIATION APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP

Our membership is open to anyone who served in Landing Craft, Infantry, during WWII or anyone else interested in our small ships and the men who served aboard them.

Please complete this form and mail it to the address indicated below with your first year's dues.

DUES ARE \$25.00 PER YEAR, June 1 through May 31.

## I. For application as a LCI Veteran:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Which LCI did you serve on? \_\_\_\_\_ What was your Rank/Rate? \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone #: \_\_\_\_\_/ \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation or Former Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Wife's Name \_\_\_\_\_

## II. For Application as a Relative or Interested Person:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone #: \_\_\_\_\_/ \_\_\_\_\_

Are you related to someone who served on an LCI?  Yes  No

If so, what is the relationship? (i.e. father, grandfather, uncle, etc) \_\_\_\_\_

What is/was his name? \_\_\_\_\_

On which LCI did he serve? \_\_\_\_\_

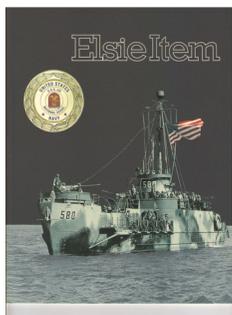
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Please send this application with your check (\$25) made payable to  
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Add Name Embroider Last Name and Ship Number on Jacket

add \$ 10 = **\$122**

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**"THE WAY WE WERE"**  
The Port liberty section of LCI(G) 464 enjoys a brief time off the ship after eighty days of service in the operations at Okinawa and Saipan. This photo, with the names of shipmates inscribed, was taken in June, 1945.