

fan

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Guam, then on to the Philippines, where we made our way to the carrier Bennington, which had about 2,000 men aboard. That was to be our home till the war was over.

We got on the Bennington in Leyte Gulf, and it seemed like every ship in the Pacific was over there at that time. There had just been a big typhoon there, and the Bennington had its flight deck, the front of it, just bent straight down. A repair ship came along and when the repairs were done, the deck was about 19 feet short.

For the pilots, life aboard the Bennington involved a lot of waiting. Mostly what you did was smoke cigarettes and drink coffee and wait to go out.

While we were there, still sitting in the gulf, one day all the horns and whistles blew, so that everybody had to go stand on deck and salute a ship that was about to pass.

It was the USS Hornet, going back to the states, and its bow was bent down just like the Bennington's. The whole fleet was in that typhoon, which was in June 1945. They lost a couple of destroyers and destroyer escorts.

We pulled out in July heading for the Japanese homeland.

We got up there and got orders for first attack. The whole fleet was softening up Japan, getting ready for a ground invasion. On this particular day, of our first raid, we were attacking an airfield. I can pronounce the name, but I can't spell it, on Honshu Island. The reconnaissance photos showed lots of airplanes

parked down there.

With the position I flew in formation, I was always the last guy to go down on the dive, the glide bomb. It was our first strike, so we had all 12 airplanes — but we never ever had 12 airplanes again.



The Bennington's typhoon-damaged hull.
Photo courtesy of the USS Bennington Reunion Association,
www.usc-bennington.org

They gave my radio man a big fancy camera, and after my dive, he was supposed to take pictures of the damage that was done. That means he had to open the door, hold it with his foot, and put this camera out and take pictures.

I pulled out of my dive, and at the last minute I remembered I'm supposed to be strafing, so I put the nose down too fast. He wasn't tied in and was taking pictures and when the nose dropped, he dropped the camera and hung on, so we never did have any pictures. His last name was Taylor. All the crewmen were laughing at him for dropping it.

When we came down, we found no

airplanes there. The Japs had flown them out or hidden them somewhere before we got there. We bombed the hangars and the runways, and then I saw a fire on the ground.

I thought it was one of ours, but I didn't find out who it was until we got back that day. It was one of my best friends, Bob Haughton. He was one of the first ones down, and he didn't pull out of the dive. Nobody knows what happened.

I'd trained with him since the squadron formed in October, and this was about 12 months later. That was the only one lost that day. He was from Pennsylvania and had just gotten married, and like me, left a wife pregnant and barefooted."



John Leslie flew numerous combat raids in the waning days of World War II. On July 28, 1945, his squadron joined in a massive strike against the Japanese fleet at Kure Naval Base. He was later honored with the Navy Cross for "extraordinary heroism."

Under intense antiaircraft fire from numerous enemy warships and shore batteries, the young pilot "courageously carried out a low-altitude, glide-bombing attack against a large cruiser to score two direct hits and inflict extensive damage on the enemy vessel," reads the citation signed by then-Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal.

"By his airmanship and aggressive fighting spirit ... Leslie contributed