

LCI 450 Memories - By Leon Fletcher (C) 1998 Leon Fletcher

LCI Memories...

Fate

by Leon Fletcher

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"You gotta go topside during combat!"

At least once---to see what's going on." That's what several in the crew of our LCI(R) kept telling Ham, the first class Motor Machinist Mate in charge of our engine room. Nick-named "Ham" because of his exceptionally large, fat hands, he'd go to his engine room more than an hour before our rocket-firing ship made an attack on a Japanese beachhead, stay there a couple of hours after our mission had been completed. Finally he'd emerge, listen attentively as the crew talked about seeing enemy troops ashore, spotting attacking planes overhead, ducking gunfire that came close aboard, and other events as we fought for our lives.

Reaction

His reply to his crewmates' urging to go topside was calm but firm, "Naw, I rather not." Still, they persisted---some kidding, some serious. "You gotta see what goes on. You're missing out on a lot of stuff."

Even when Ham had no duties in his engine room, he'd spend much of his time there. If he could find no gear that needed attending, he'd take a book and read in that tremendously noisy, hot, setting, often for hours at a time. His reading focused on his Bible and a few related books---mostly novelizations of religious events.

Occasionally, when our ship was not in combat, Ham sat in on the crew's frequent bull-sessions; he seldom spoke. Yet he did reluctantly let us know that he was strongly against killing anyone. But he had great devotion to his country.

He told us that back home, on a mid-west farm, his job was to maintain diesel engines much like those aboard our ship. When the draft pushed him toward carrying a rifle, he joined the Navy to use his knowledge.

The LCI's diesels were Ham's babies. They shinned like no other landing craft's engines. They never broke down.

Change of Mind

Finally, one time, just after our ship had finished firing rockets at a beachhead and was working offshore, Ham decided to go topside. At the very moment he opened the

hatch that led out of his engine room, a Japanese plane strafed our ship.

Ham was not hit. But as he stepped outside, a seaman right in front of him was struck by an enemy bullet. The sailor fell to the deck. Ham, already moving, was forced to step over the body.

Never again did Ham leave his engine room during combat.

The End

The author is former Communications Officer, LCI(R) Group 20; former Lt. Cmdr, USNR; now full-time writer, author of 16 books, 700+ articles published.