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Interview with Vice Admiral John D. Bulkeley, U.S. Navy (Retired)

'I Crashed on Through'

Fresh from the 50th anniversary commemoration of the Normandy invasion, the World War II Medal of Honor recipient recently talked to Naval History editor Fred L. Schultz for Proceedings about his dramatic encounter with two German corvettes 50 years ago off the coast of Southern France. He snapped the photo above at dawn.

Proceedings: Many of us know about the fight between the German corvettes *Nimet Allah* and *Capriolo* and your destroyer, the *Endicott* (DD-495), in August 1944. Could you set the stage for those unfamiliar with the story?

Admiral Bulkeley: How far back do you want to go?

Proceedings: Why don't we start with taking command of the destroyer?

Admiral Bulkeley: On D+38 (38 days after the Normandy invasion) I was summoned to the destroyer *Endicott*. She had been in a collision, and she had also been late in getting to the invasion of Normandy. Commodore Harry Sanders said that her captain lacked the drive, the initiative, and the aggressiveness required of a destroyer captain. And he wanted to get rid of this one. So he sent for me.

We got in a whaleboat and went over to the *Endicott*, where he told me to go down in the plotting room and stay there until I heard that the commodore had left the ship. I was then to go up on the bridge and announce that I was taking command. There were no written orders or notification to the Bureau of Personnel—or anyone else. So I took command and got the ship under way. And away we went, down to the invasion of Southern France.

Proceedings: How long did it take you to get the ship into shape?

Admiral Bulkeley: The ship was, in my book, in poor material condition, no question about it. When I went to work with



In yet another chapter in Vice Admiral Bulkeley's illustrious 60-year active-duty career, his sinking of two German corvettes yielded 179 prisoners. The *Endicott* transferred them to the French, who "made them walk bare-tailed down the center of town," Bulkeley heard later.

that crew, I made it very plain. I said, "Look, this is a fighting ship. She might get into action. If you're going to save your lives, you'd better work like hell, night and day. We're going to be watertight. And you're going to make damn sure all the guns are working, and the ammunition is readily available."

All these things had to be put together. And the crew did it in a relatively short time—about three days, I guess.

I did not know exactly what my task was going to be. Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., the actor, was in the middle of this business for a diversionary raid to la Ciotat. The basic idea was to make a pretense of invading. We were to draw two German divisions all the way from St. Tropez east to our area of concentration.

We fired 3,000 rounds continuously over two nights, which convinced the Germans that the invasion was going to take place, that this was a preinvasion bombardment. It did look real.

We also had PT boats that went in raising hell, shooting off tracers and machine guns, yelling, shouting, and screaming, and dropping depth charges in order to make it all look like it was a preinvasion assault. I'm told that the Germans moved two full divisions to the east, about 80 to 100 miles from where the real assault would take place. When General Mark Clark landed his troops there on that particular D-day, only one soldier was killed; he stepped on a mine.

My work was finished after the Germans had been drawn off. Because our ship had sustained some damage, I was sent down to Sicily. There were PT boats in that area under the command of Captain Stanley Barnes, a very fine officer and classmate of mine. On my way down to Sicily for repairs I got a radio call from *PT-379* that two German gunboats were attacking two British ships, the *Scarab* and the *Aphis*, and that the latter two were getting the worst of it. They were river gunboats built for China duty, and they had very little fire control. Their guns were small, and their speed was not more than 8 or 12 knots.

I turned around immediately when I heard they were under attack. We soon saw huge clouds of black smoke, which looked almost as though some ships were on fire. I didn't know what was on the other side, so I crashed on through.

The *Aphis* and the *Scarab* were apparently somewhere else, running like hell. Fairbanks admitted in a letter to me later that they were getting out of the way. They would have been goners otherwise, he said. I was making 36 knots when I started after the German ships. They were doing 28 or 30 knots themselves. That is when I took the picture.

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When you run into the enemy, you've got to attack, no question about it. Everyone was getting kind of shaky about the fact that we were running into something we didn't know. When we took a look at the armament—5-inch guns—we surmised that these boys were just as strong as we were.

Our mounts were armored with quarter-inch steel. They had theirs right out in the open. And they were quite big. I ordered our 5-inch guns to commence firing at a range about 6,000 or 8,000 yards—good hitting range. About two minutes went by, and no guns fired. I said, "What the hell is going on?" Right off the bat, we had a problem closing the breaches. We had overheated parts of the guns during the earlier shore bombardment, which caused them to seize up. The only gun we had working was mount three. A great big strapping gunner's mate first class was in charge of that turret. He was loading the shells by ramming them in by hand. The breach itself was sticking, and it wouldn't fire unless it was fully closed. So he used a sledgehammer to pound it tight. At that time we began to fire.

Apparently, we were pretty effective. We kept closing the range as fast as we possibly could. They had torpedoes in those ships, and I didn't want those guys to have a straight-line shot at us. So we did a lot of zigging and zagging as we closed the range. We swept their decks with the 40-mm and 20-mm gunfire.

By this time, we had closed to within 800 yards, by some accounts, and our 5-inch guns were scoring some hits. One of the ships capsized, and the other one sank later on. That was that. The fight was over as far as we were concerned. By this time, the British gunboats had started coming back.

We picked up 179 prisoners out of the water. The German captains were very bitter and nasty. They claimed they lost 200 men drowned. I personally didn't give a damn one way or the other. We picked up everyone we could and did the right thing.

A doctor and a chiropractor—can you imagine—worked together and operated on the wardroom table from 0800 to 2400 that day. We had five Germans die, and

we gave them a full military funeral. We sent both German captains down to the wardroom. I didn't know what to do with them, but according to the book, we were supposed to treat them decently, as gentlemen. They were tough birds, complete with dueling scars, and they were full captains. I was only a lieutenant commander, and I don't think they liked that very much.



Captain Henry Johnson (center) warned Lieutenant Commander Bulkeley (right) that he would have him court-martialed if anything happened to the *Endicott* in combat against the enemy ships that had attacked two British gunboats—one of which had actor Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. (left) on board. To that Bulkeley replied, "Commence firing!"

Proceedings: Since you fought small combatants with such great effect during your war career, what do you think the future of small combatants is in today's Navy? Are they still valuable?

Admiral Bulkeley: I'm glad you asked that question. My career was not necessarily small combatants. Commodore Sanders said, "Look, you can't stay in small boats all your life. You've got to get out. I know you like them. It's great. You do fine. But you've got to get into destroyers, cruisers, and battleships; that's where it counts when it comes to the heavy hitters."

And so immediately I went to the destroyer *Endicott*. From there, we had another destroyer command. And from there, I went to cruisers and finally ended up with a battleship. That was what it was all about. So you can't really tag me as a small-boat man.

Is there a future in small boats? In the *Cyclone* (PC-1) class there is. There are some patrolling off Haiti right now. Future? We have to have smaller craft to take care of peripheral problem areas, like Somalia and Haiti. These boats are far more sophisticated, are more capable,

have more firepower, and are more deadly than I ever even envisioned in my PT boats. There's a future all right.

Proceedings: How did you feel about getting the Medal of Honor for rescuing General Douglas MacArthur from the Philippines so early in the war?

Was it a help or a hindrance to the way you fought later?

Admiral Bulkeley: I didn't know what the Medal of Honor was. I did not want to be treated differently. It really didn't mean a lot to me. My career rested entirely on my professional ability, as you well know, if you read the whole story.

Proceedings: Do you think the veterans were honored properly at the Normandy anniversary events?

Admiral Bulkeley: Absolutely. In my opinion, we were highly honored, and it was very well done. I was selected to greet the President. Then they lined us up, and he went down the line and shook hands with us all. The *George Washington* (CVN-73) hangar deck had more darned admirals than you could shake a stick at. It was very well done.

We heard no catcalls or any other derogatory statements from any of the enlisted men or the officers. It was all on the up and up. Mr. Clinton did what he was supposed to do as the President, and he did it well. One thing they made damned sure of was that the veterans were up front during the ceremonies, and not relegated to the back, as they usually are, to make room in front for all the congressmen, senators, and other politicians. This time, the veterans had the best seats.

Proceedings: What do you think about the rest of the World War II anniversaries? Why do you think they don't get as much media attention as Normandy?

Admiral Bulkeley: Well, my answer to that is that all of us are so damned old. These guys are all in their late 70s and early 80s, some are in wheelchairs, some on crutches. We're just plain old—aged. And people aren't very interested in that. Who cares? I'm in my 80s.

Proceedings: A lot of people care.