

Ship's bell tolls a memorable WW2 tale

By Jerry Bowen

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Having spent more than 10 ten years in the U.S. Navy, mostly on the USS Kawishiwi, and as a plank-owner of the USS Buchanan in the late 50s and 60s, I feel somewhat qualified in making the following statement:

You can take a sailor from a ship but never take the memory of a ship from the sailor.

Or, well something like that.

As we shall see, Rio Vista resident Tony Brown's memories of his ship, the USS Kanawha, have remained high in his memory for a very long time.

Built in 1914 at Mare Island, the Kanawha was the first of its type. Its mission was to fuel warships while under way at sea. Up until she was built, thoughts of fueling coal-powered ships with bags of coal while at sea was impractical and the newer ships of the time were being built fueled by oil.

Before we continue, some of you may ask why a sailor refers to his ship as she Admiral Chester Nimitz once commented, "A ship is always referred to as she because it costs so much to keep one in paint and powder." Actually I think it is a little more than just that.

This USS Kanawha was the third ship to hold the name and was launched 11 July, 1914 sponsored by Miss Dorothy Bennett; and commissioned 5 June, 1915, with Lt. Comdr. Richard Werner, USNRF, in command.

Most of the Kanawha's career from 1916 until the start of World War I was as minor support to the Navy, delivering fuel from one place to another, participating in tactical exercises, carrying mail, and towing targets. After America entered World War I, she was assigned to Commander, Destroyer Force, Atlantic Fleet, cruising in Atlantic waters supplying fuel oil to the cruiser force and escorting convoys in submarine-infested waters to Europe.

Kanawha was decommissioned at Puget Sound Yard on 18 December, 1929.

She was re-commissioned 5 June, 1934 and based at San Pedro, California. For the following six years she cruised along the West Coast, supplying oil and gasoline to

ports in the Canal Zone, the Caribbean, and Hawaii. In 1941 Kanawha widened her operations, sailing east to Midway and Wake Island, and as far north as Alaska. She was at Mare Island undergoing overhaul at the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Kanawha departed San Pedro 21 March, 1942 with a convoy loaded with supplies for Hawaii. She continued convoy runs from California to Pearl Harbor until 18 May when she arrived at Tongatabu for fueling operations in the South Pacific. Throughout the summer she cruised to New Caledonia, Espiritu Santo, and Efate, providing fuel for destroyers and transports en route to the Pacific campaigns. She departed Pago Pago 12 Oct. and put into San Francisco 29 Oct. for repairs and overhaul.

Kanawha resumed fueling operations upon her return to Pago Pago 13 Feb., 1943. For the next 2 months she serviced ships engaged in the struggle in the Solomon Islands.

On 7 April a group of enemy Vals Japanese dive bombers slipped through fighter defenses and zeroed in on Kanawha as she awaited an escort in Tulagi Harbor. At 1502 3:02 P.M. shortly after clearing the harbor, the slow and vulnerable ship came under a dive-bomber attack. The first five planes hit an oil tank under the bridge, causing fires to spread rapidly along the deck. Lt. Comdr. Brainerd ordered the ship abandoned to minimize danger to his crew from burning oil on the surface.

After rescue operations were under way, volunteers returned on board and extinguished fires amid exploding ammunition. The tugboat Rail towed the Kanawha to the west side of Tulagi where she was beached shortly before midnight. However, she slid off into deep water and sank before daybreak on 8 April. Nineteen of her crew were lost, including a relative of Rio Vista Museum's longtime volunteer, Marybelle O'Connor.

Last month, while I was visiting the Rio Vista Museum, I noticed the Kanawha's ship's bell on display. Nearby was a photo of the ship with the names of the men who were lost in the battle. My first question was, "How the heck did the bell end up at the museum when the ship was sunk in about 120 feet of water half way around the world. The answer was because of the memories and efforts of one of the crewmembers, Tony Brown, who lives in Rio Vista, and there was another interesting story to record for history.

Tony graciously granted an interview at the Rio Vista Museum a couple of weeks ago with the following result in his own words.

"The day we lost the USS Kanawha was April 7th, 1943 at about 2 p.m. We were in the largest air raid that the Japanese had put in the air since Pearl Harbor."

"We had over a hundred planes in the air flying over us. They sunk the Aaron Ward, a destroyer that was escorting us out of the harbor at Tulagi Island. Also, an Australian Corvette went down too. It went down so fast that no one could say whether it split in two or went down whole."

"I joined a golf tournament in Stockton back in the 1970s, and in my foursome, there was a golf pro in San Francisco that was in the 1st Marine Division."

"They had a plan to take a trip to Guadalcanal 35 years later to visit a hill that they had taken over from the Japanese. They were going back to visit the hill and then on to Fiji and Melbourne, Australia."

"I asked if there was a chance that I might go along and he said there might be a chance."

"Later, he sent me some papers to fill out and I sent them back filled out. Two weeks later I received a letter letting me know that I could go and to please send my money and they would make all the details. This was in June 1976."

"We left from San Francisco for Honolulu, then on to Fiji and the next day to Guadalcanal."

"At the motel we stayed in, I met two fellows from Australia that had the franchise and salvage rights to dive and take what they wanted from the sunken WW-II ships. They would refinish the things and sell them."

"They were showing pictures one night to some people and I introduced myself to them and asked if they had ever done any salvage over at Tulagi."

"The answer was yes and he said he had the Kanawha's ship's bell up at his house. He said he would pick me up the next morning and show it to me if I would like to see it."

"The next morning he picked me up and we went to his house and the ship's bell was on his front lawn. I looked at the bell and sat down on the lawn and had a good cry! This was 35 years after the Japanese sank the Kanawha."

"I offered him five thousand dollars for the bell but he said no soap. The bell had memories for him also. They dove down three times and thought the bell was a toilet seat or bowl before they retrieved it. He also said that if something should come up some day in the future, I would have the first chance to buy the bell."

"I had gone back to Guadalcanal one year after the reunion with the marines and had them dive again over at the Kanawha's location. They got me the after masthead light and the General Quarters horn. The bell was still there at that time and he moved it over to his parent's home in Sydney, Australia later. We stayed about two weeks on the island and then returned home. I brought the after masthead light and General Quarters horn home with me on that trip."

"Ten years later I received a phone call from him wanting to know if I still wanted the bell. He said I could have it and that he would make a deal with me."

"He had a son and daughter that wanted to come to the United States and if I would purchase their round-trip tickets, he would let them come over and stay with us for two weeks. He would send the bell with the kids. We also asked if we would take them to Disneyland, which was something they would really like to see."

"The boy, Josh, was 15 and the girl, Tasha, 13. We purchased their tickets and a month later they were with us and they brought the bell."

"The cost for their tickets to come from Sydney, the Disneyland trip, some Sacramento wrestling matches, San Francisco, Alcatraz and Fisherman's Wharf, new clothes and luggage came to approximately six thousand dollars and I feel it was well worth it. We still hear from Josh and Tasha and they were beautiful kids."

"The bell has gone with us to all the Kanawha reunions. We have one each year. My shipmates can't believe that we have our bell. It weighs over one hundred pounds."

Tony Brown donated his treasured artifacts to the Rio Vista Museum where they rest among other honored memories of those dangerous times.

They were the generation that fought during World War II and many again in the Korean War. They have memories of their time that range from unspeakable horror to more gentle times and now we have another story about the "Greatest Generation" thanks to Tony Brown.

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