

A Moment of Valor: *Heroism emerging in conflict.*

by Sonny Hays-Eberts

Clarence Lankford spoke of being a Radioman aboard a Fletcher Class Destroyer, the *USS Robley D. Evans* (DD-552), with no embellishment. Only when he finished did the other gentlemen remind him his account was lacking. Only when one gentleman insisted he would say it, did Clarence relent.

The 'Fighting Bob' was on radar picket station with the *USS Hadley* (DD-774) during the Battle for Okinawa. Near the end of the war, the Japanese made the heaviest use of kamikazes and sent a major attack. The destroyers received aid from naval aviators, but the ships fired every gun until the loaders were exhausted and the ships were shrouded in haze. Naval aviators, out of ammo, resorted to forcing the kamikazes into the water with their own planes. A total of 46 planes were destroyed and the *Evans* set the airplane kill record for Fletcher class destroyers. The action took its toll - the *Evans* was hit by four kamikazes. The ship received a Presidential Unit Citation for its action that day:

"For extraordinary heroism in action as support destroyer on radar picket station number 15 during an attack by approximately 100 enemy Japanese planes, 40 miles northwest of the Okinawa Transport Area, May 11, 1945. Fighting valiantly against waves of hostile suicide planes plunging toward her from all directions, the USS EVANS sent up relentless barrages of anti-aircraft fire during one of the most furious air-sea battles of the war. Repeatedly finding her targets, she destroyed 14 enemy planes, assisted in downing three others and, by her vigilance and superb battle readiness, avoided damage to herself until subjected to a coordinated attack by five Japanese planes. Shooting one down clear of the ship, she was crashed by the other four with devastating effect. With all engineering spaces flooded and with a fire raging amidships, the gallant officers and men of the EVANS fought desperately against almost insurmountable odds and, by their indomitable determination, fortitude and skill, brought the damage under control, enabling their ship to be towed to port and saved. Her brilliant performance in this action reflects the highest credit upon the EVANS and the United States Naval Services."

For more details, visit <http://www.usssevans.org>.

It was a difficult story for Clarence to recount. When he talked of damage control and of finding and recovering the bodies of his friends and shipmates, it was easy to see how deeply he was affected, even 60 years later. I still hear his voice... "It was my duty... No. It was my *honor* to take care of those men." A happy ending does follow. While recuperating, Clarence met a lovely hospital dietician named Doris. She eventually consented to marry him.

I suspect Clarence would want others to get credit for their service: Don Newcomer, Kelly Falknor (passed on in 2004), Don Timmoney, Ed Stout and all of the vets who meet now at the library. They served our country with honor in wartime and they continue to serve in many ways today. That is why they are heroes.