

Mystery of the Desert Gun Turret

America's vast deserts are a depository for many strange items and people, but few are stranger than a main gun turret from a heroic World War Two cruiser — combined with the fact the turret is located on a nuclear test range!

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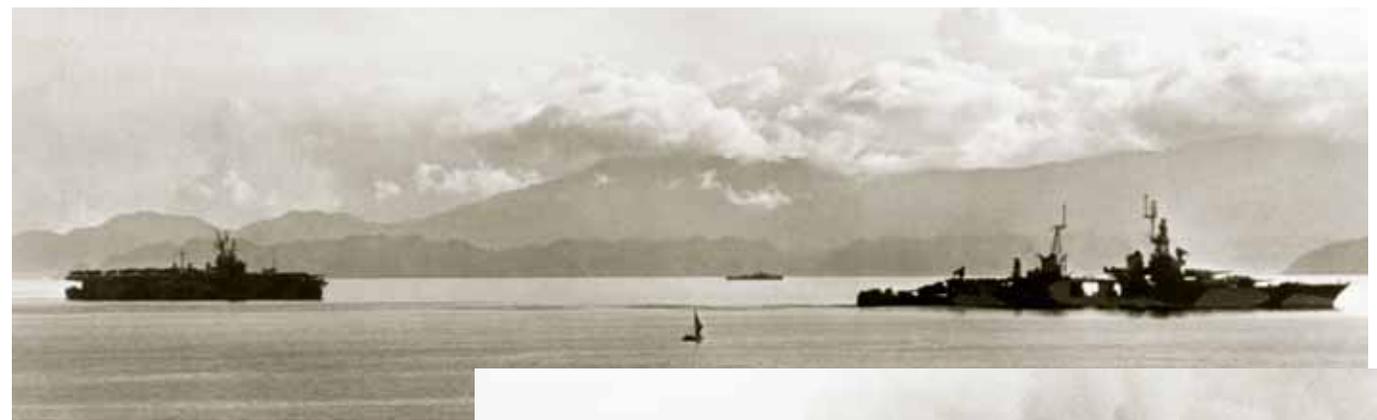
Like many a warm afternoon west of Luzon, the sky on 5 January 1945 was light and blue with patchy clouds, visibility about 12-mi, with a steady breeze wafting over a gentle swell. Steaming at 15-kts with a comfortable 50-fathoms under her keel, USS *Portland* and elements of CRUDIV 4 were transiting to Lingayen Gulf with the division Flagship USS *Louisville* fine on the starboard bow. In formation R40 since 0700 with the battleship USS *Pennsylvania* bearing 60-deg true as formation lead, the heavy units of Task Group 77.2 formed an inner defensive ring around the escort carriers of Task Group 77.4, with *Louisville* and *Portland* on the left-hand side of the formation. The destroyers of both groups formed an outer screen, with HMAS *Arunta* abeam of the Flagship another 1000-yards out.

At his battle station aboard the *Portland* was BMS Ted Waller, an aircraft spotter for the #1 quad 40mm mount on the starboard side. He had been there on and off since before dawn, and was looking forward to a break and his dinner. Ordinarily, being on watch topside

Mark 9 turret in Area 2 at the Nevada National Security Site. View is looking west. (R. Hoffman/LLNL)

was, for 95% of Ted's war so far at least, somewhat boring and prone to reminisce, but the recent past had done away with any and all casual attitudes.

No stranger to action, Ted had been with the ship since shortly before the war. On hand for the most desperate fighting in its first year, he had personally witnessed the American fleet carriers *Lexington*, *Yorktown*, *Wasp*, and *Hornet* all come to grief. His most enduring nightmare was of the time when *Portland* had participated in the lopsided first Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, the most ferocious engagement in the history of the USN. On deck during the night action, Ted had been wounded early on and, while lying on the deck of the wheelhouse next to a junior officer, had wondered what he would do after the ship had been torpedoed. That fear had been rekindled two-months prior when, finding himself on deck facing another night engagement with Japanese battleships, *Portland* had done her part in the Battle of Suriago Strait. But this time it had been a one-sided affair for the Americans, the IJN had blundered into a classical



USS *Louisville* ahead of USS *Tulagi* en route to Lingayen Gulf. (Naval History and Heritage Command photo NH 94433)

USS *Lexington* on fire and sinking during the battle of the Coral Sea. Taken from the USS *Portland*, 8 May 1942. (Naval History and Heritage Command photo NH 51382)



A kamikaze is splashed close aboard HMAS *Arunta*. (Naval History and Heritage Command photo 80-G-339177)

naval trap and effectively been annihilated. That action, among others during the Leyte Gulf operation, had for all intents and purposes rendered the last remnants of the Japanese Navy impotent.

This was now the third day of their transit, the tension mounting with enemy aircraft contacts on the rise as each mile slid by under the keel. Two-days' prior, a kamikaze had hit the fleet oiler USS *Cowanessque*. Rapid damage control had saved her and she was still with the formation. The following day, another kamikaze had crashed onto the escort carrier USS *Ommaney Bay*, and although desperate measures were taken, she had turned into a raging inferno. Subsequently abandoned, she was scuttled by her escort before nightfall. Since that attack had occurred in the rear of the formation, *Portland* had not been in position to help, but everyone aboard knew that could change at any moment.

As the day started, so again did the radar contacts. The ship had gone to general quarters several times since before dawn, with condition I-E set in the A/A battery almost continuously. At 1614 enemy planes were again reported over the formation, and the ship went to general quarters at 1653. Three-minutes later it was game on.



USS *Louisville* under kamikaze attack (red arrow) off Luzon, Philippine Islands, 5 January 1945. The blue arrow indicates "friendly fire." (National Archives Catalog #80-G-363217)

Two Judys coming in on the deck were making a run on the Flagship. The *Portland's* skipper, Capt. T.G.W. "Tex" Settle, a pioneer in balloon aviation early in his career, was well known as an aggressive ship handler. The *Louisville's* captain R.L. Hicks was of like mind, and the two heavy cruisers started maneuvering radically.

Ted could hear the port side 5-in guns opening up. Ahead he could see the *Louisville* was also firing to port with her 5-in and then her 40mm guns. Smooth, precise, deadly accurate fire, a consequence of long practice under relentless gunnery officers, paid dividends when one of the planes came down close aboard the HMAS *Arunta*. But the second plane, which had looped around to the right of its ill-fated comrade, continued to close on the Flagship's port bow. Ted could

