

5. Call sign: November Quebec Kilo Oscar



Signal flags for
YMS 339's WWII
call sign (NQKO).

On November 28th, YMS 339 motored with their convoy through the waters off Samar Island in Leyte Gulf, before anchoring at 1710 hours in San Pedro Bay. Off Samar, only one month earlier, a major engagement of the Battle of Leyte Gulf, history's largest sea battle, took place. A group of Japanese carriers sacrificed themselves to draw the main US fleet carriers and battleships away from the landing area. US troops had just gone ashore there in the first landings to retake the Philippines. The American ships still near the beaches included dozens of amphibious and supply ships, minesweepers, 16 slow speed escort carriers with 30 planes each, called jeep carriers, and their escorting destroyers. Into this area on October 25th, by complete surprise, came a Japanese force comprised of four battleships, five cruisers, and 11 escorting destroyers. Their objective was to sink the lightly-armed US ships, leaving the Allied troops ashore unprotected and unsupplied, against a large Japanese garrison; thus stymieing the planned US recapture of the Philippines, and preventing loss of the nearby vital shipping lanes to their irreplaceable fuel oil sources to the southwest.



USS Johnston (DD 557) in 1943; first warship with
a Native American as captain. He, his ship, and
185 shipmates were lost off Samar.



USS Gambier Bay (CVE 73) under heavy fire.
Splashes from exploding shells tower over it.

It is a story well known to US destroyer sailors to this day. The destroyers were the only US ships there that could out-run the Japanese battleships. They were soon steaming at flank speed, their highest, not away from the battleships, but towards them. In what has been called the "last stand of the tin-can sailors", seven destroyers escorting the first group of six jeep carriers attacked. They were helped by the jeep carrier pilots who were trained mostly to attack land targets, not ships, but who pressed attacks nonetheless. Together, they could only buy time. Battleships and cruisers have thick steel armor, destroyers do not. Large caliber shells were soon exploding near and into the US jeep carriers and destroyers. Some were the world's largest naval shells, 18 inches in diameter and weighing 3,200 lbs. The escort carrier USS Gambier Bay (CVE 73) was sunk and five others damaged. Destroyers USS Johnston (DD 557), Hoel (DD 533) and Roberts (DE 413) were sunk or sinking, and the four others damaged. But the furious attacks had caused the Japanese force to fall out of order. Three of the Japanese cruisers were heavily damaged and would later sink. A few tropical squall lines confused the situation. The commanding Japanese admiral, believing incorrectly that such attacks would only be made if a large US main force was nearby, decided to turn back and not go on to attack the other US ships near the beaches. Thus the battle off Samar Island was ended without disruption to the landing force. The larger Battle of Leyte Gulf, of which this was only a part, was won decisively by the US. The Japanese surface fleet had heavy losses, including four carriers, three battleships, and ten cruisers sunk. The battle also marked the first wide use of suicide planes, the kamikazes. In the confusing aftermath, with exaggerated worries of lurking submarines, rescue of the survivors of the sunk US ships off Samar was delayed and many perished at sea.

There are no monuments on the surface of the ocean to mark naval battle sites. Once the debris and oil slicks disperse nothing remains of the earlier events there. So the men of 339 would have seen nothing unusual. But the sailors at the San Pedro Bay anchorage knew the details from one month before. 339's men would soon learn.

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The Philippines, a Spanish colony since the 16th century, was ceded to the US at the end of the Spanish American War in 1898. It became a self-governing commonwealth in 1935. The Japanese invaded the Philippines, defeating the American forces stationed there in 1942. They took over US military bases notably the large ones at Subic Bay and at Clark Air Base, both on the island of Luzon along with the capital city of Manila. The Allied plan to liberate the Philippines called for amphibious assault landings at unpredictable beaches, then defeating the local garrison with the important help of the native Filipino's. Then, harbors and airfields were set up to support the next series of landings. Leyte Island, next to Samar, was the site of

the first landings. The whole island of Leyte would not be retaken by Army troops until mid-December, but by late November when 339 got there, San Pedro Bay in Leyte Gulf (see blue arrow on map) was already a very busy anchorage for further landings elsewhere in the Philippines. The ships in the anchorage were the target of attacks from land-based Japanese aircraft, one of the hazards of being in a very forward area. From the time they arrived through

December 11th, 339 was assigned with other YMS's to sweep for mines in Leyte Gulf, and to patrol approach areas. When not doing this, 339 would anchor in the Bay and ensure all their equipment was in working order for the upcoming action.

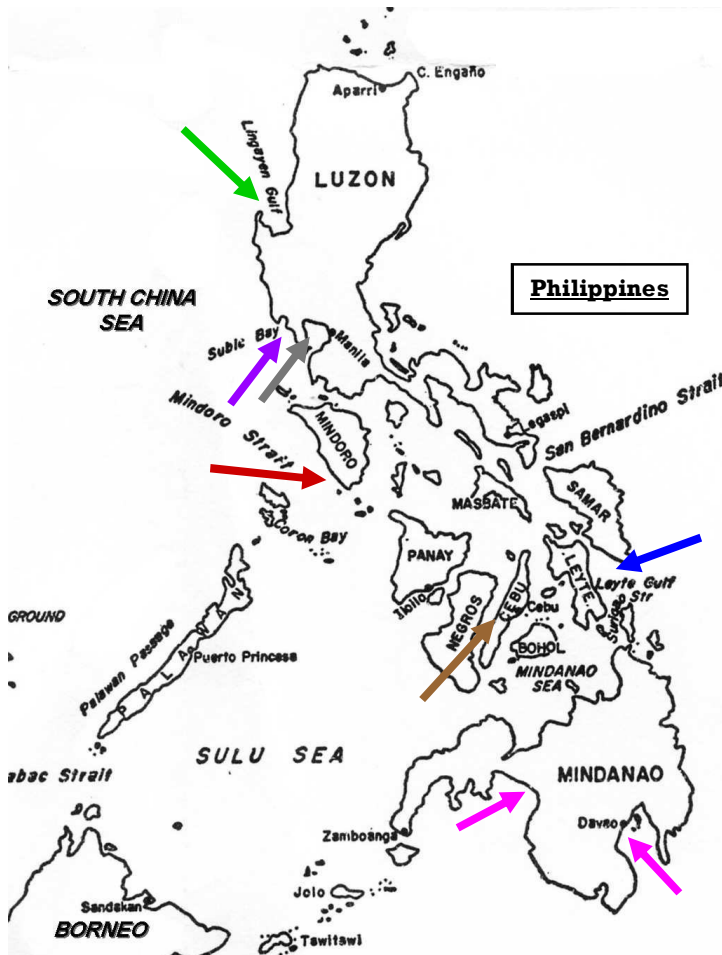
HH diary November 28th: Anchored awaiting further orders. The island of Leyte looks about the same as the others except maybe a little more civilized. Hope to go ashore here. The front lines are about 15 miles away, but I am unable to hear any firing. 29th: The Filipino natives practically took over this ship today. Their slogan: "Happy New Year, Merry Christmas, Happy Holiday, give us flour!" Most of the trading today has been for Japanese P.I. money. We have been giving them clothes and some canned goods. 30th: Well, I've seen the war - or rather I've seen some of it. We were at GQ most of last night and this morning as the Jap suicide torpedo planes attacked consistently. Although we did see a number of them suicide, we didn't see them do any damage to any of the ships in the harbor. But it was not only suicide planes, it was our own ack ack that was dangerous. As the planes came in low over the water, all ships would open up and, well, it sounded like all hell breaking loose.

December 2nd: Talked to some natives that seemed pretty well educated today. They still live in caves on Samar. They left the city of Tacloban when the Japs arrived. 3rd: we are patrolling the entrance to Leyte Gulf, which is about seventy miles from Tacloban. Patrol is for anti-submarine. Maybe we can get some rest out here from the Japs. This being at G.Q. all the time is pretty tiresome. As yet we haven't seen more than two of the anchored ships hit - a pretty good percentage. 5th: Well, I really had a reveille

this morning! About a half hour before six the bow of the ship - that's my sack - went up, then I heard a big explosion, to top that off the G.Q. horn above my sack went off. I was lost! When I arrived at my G.Q. station with two shoes - both for the same foot - I asked the officer of the deck what had happened. All he could do was point. I followed his direction and saw a plane speeding away. He was speechless. The plane dropped a 100 lb bomb, which landed about 50 yards from our bow. Luckily no damage was caused. The plane never came back. The story we heard was that the guys on watch saw the plane - Hap - come in and saw it drop its bomb - but all they could say was "a bomb". They were too shocked to man their guns. Two hours later we were told to go home. Then at anchor just about twilight - Flash Red, Control Yellow - the Jap torpedo [planes] came in again. What a barrage of ack-ack went up. The sky looked like a Christmas tree with all the tracers. Well, one torpedo plane came close, but the worst was that the ships on all sides started firing at it and we were in the middle.

December 7th: Was at G.Q. most of the night. But that day is over - Amen! Not much today. Our chow is getting bad. We are even running out of corned beef. I think that the natives are running out of eggs and bananas too, as we have been taking all we can. Still no mail. The last mail we had was November 11th. December 9th: Our chow consists of canned peas, carrots, and beets. 10th: Went alongside the dock at Tacloban today. I didn't go off the ship, but all I saw was mud, soldiers and more mud. The town resembles Manzanillo, Mexico - two story buildings and animals running around free. I guess that "Dugout Doug" [General Douglas MacArthur] really wants this place. The natives live in shabby huts. I take my hat off to the infantry - they really work hard and do a good job. Nobody trusts these natives too much. 11th: All quiet before the storm. [Diary writer Hartford H. Holden was 20 years old this day].

Mindoro invasion: On December 12th, the ship rendezvoused with Task Unit 78.12, a



lead convoy assigned for the next landings. This amphibious attack group included 17 minesweepers, more than six dozen amphibious ships, 31 escorting destroyers, and the unit flagship, the cruiser Nashville (CL 43). They steered various courses through the island straits for the next 2 days—their secret destination was beaches on the southwest coast of the island of Mindoro (see red arrow on map on page 26), about 300 miles away in a straight line. Not heavily defended, but behind enemy lines and surrounded by enemy airfields. Another large US force with carriers, battleships, cruisers, and more destroyers would separately arrive in the area to provide support.



Head-on photo of a burning kamikaze diving on the cruiser Columbia (CL 56) at Lingayen. This one just missed.

On the 13th, the cruiser Nashville was hit by a kamikaze with 133 killed. YMS 315 picked up men blown overboard. Nashville had to return to Leyte with the attack convoy going on without their original flagship.

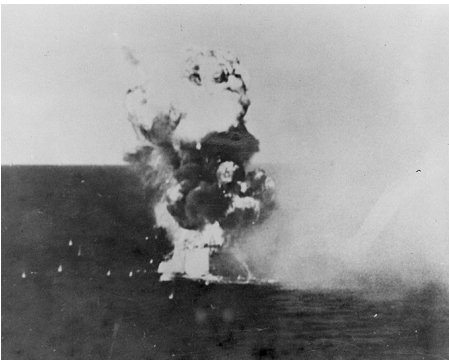
HH diary: No trouble yet, but it is to be expected before long. We had a good night's sleep last night so that is something to be thankful for. Those boys in the infantry are the ones that have it tough. 14th: Just after I finished the word 'tough' above, the Japs struck. One plane dived into a cruiser on the other side of the formation [USS Nashville], causing a severe explosion. Then they hit this side of the convoy. The sky was filled with ack-ack. The "Boise" [CL-47], which was on our port quarter got credit for three. The main show came later that evening when our P-38s [land-based fighters] arrived. We witnessed one dog fight which seemed to last about a half hour, but in reality lasted only a fraction of a minute. As this Jap plane went down on fire every one cheered like they would at a ball game. That sight is something that I am unable to put in words or on paper. Later the Navy planes came. Then the fight was uneven. We saw the last of a formation of six Jap bombers go down with over twenty of our planes getting a shot at him. The bombers did drop their bombs but they were very inaccurate. Not one Jap plane got in to the transports.



Second kamikaze just before it hit the cruiser Columbia.

On the 14th, 186 Japanese planes took off but failed to find the convoys in the Sulu Sea. Instead they ran into fighter planes from the fleet carriers, and many were shot down.

At 0600 hours on Friday December 15, YMS 339 again went to general quarters (GQ) without the boatswain mate's words "this is a drill". The deck log simply explains: "enemy planes attacked." Another wave came at the convoy at 0715. The ship secured from battle stations at 0735 and probably had breakfast. At 0840, again at GQ, 339 went ahead of the force with other YMS's and began sweeping for mines at the approaches to the landing beaches. Sweeping would continue without stopping until 1615, late afternoon. There were no mines there and no minesweepers were lost. 339 then began to depart the beach area with other sweepers. They stayed at GQ until 2300, 11pm, when they were miles away, because of the risk of air attack. The crew would have eaten a quick cold lunch and dinner in shifts at their battle stations. Army troops landed that day on the Mindoro beaches, following naval gun and airplane bombardments that took place just over the minesweepers heads while they were sweeping. The planes came from carriers under the command of Vice Admiral McCain, the grandfather of today's Senator John McCain. Kamikazes were busy, most were shot down, but one escort carrier and two destroyers were hit; and two LST's were hit and sunk near the Mindoro beaches. YMS 339 earned its first battle star for the combat this day. Coincidentally, it was Maurice's 31st birthday.



Instant of impact. 14 died. Columbia continued its mission after extinguishing the fire.

HH diary: December 16: Well, yesterday was my most hectic day I've spent in this Navy. We broke away from the main body of the convoy and swept the invasion beaches at sunrise. The troops landed at 0920 after an hour of heavy bombardment. No mines were encountered, but I did see my first Jap. There was only one pill box in this vicinity and the sweeps ahead of us got that. The Jap planes were over alright. But they only got two LSTs - what explosions and fires! Then last night at dusk the Japs came - in numbers that looked like it might be their whole air force. But they missed completely. So far I have seen only a few ships hit by the suiciding attacks. A couple of interceding Jap ships were destroyed by our bigger ships. We planned to stay but pulled out at dark for Leyte again. We did come fairly close to the beach near the airfield last night and saw a number of Jap planes on the ground. During the sweep we were bothered consistently by the planes but our P-38s and I guess, Lady Luck, were with us. Stood GQ from 0530 to 2130 yesterday - was I tired! I can't say that I won't see another invasion, but next time I



LST 738 aflame after kamikaze attack off Mindoro. A rescue destroyer is alongside at left. The LST was abandoned and sunk.

will have more faith in the Army and Navy and "Dugout Doug" and his staff. This operation worked out perfectly. Just like the operation was expected to work. December 19TH: Flags were at half mast this afternoon as the dead were buried at sea. I guess that there was considerably more damage than what first appeared.

339, in convoy, arrived back at San Pedro Bay off Leyte on December 18th and moored. With some patrol duty nearby, they stayed until January 2, 1945, having both Christmas and New Years there.

HH diary: December 23rd: The Japs came over again tonight. Those guys should be running out of planes before long, the way they dive them into the water. 24th: Christmas Eve. After the honorable sons of Nippon gave themselves to their god by suiciding - I, MacCaffrey from Highland Park, Illinois and Pete Petri from Brooklyn finished a half a quart of Old Taylor we got way back in Panama. 25th: No chance to go to church, so six of us rowed ashore to Bassey, Samar. We had quite a time giving away candy and food. These natives seemed to have a lot of fun watching us and we had a lot of fun acting as Santa Claus. They sure do live in poverty. January 1st: Spent a quiet New Year's Eve last night. Today we are still making preparations for this forthcoming operation.

Lingayen Gulf invasion: On January 2nd, at 0645, they got underway at 10 knots with Task Group 77.6, for Lingayen Gulf, in the northern part of the Philippines (see green arrow on map on page 26). They would have to go further this time and run the gauntlet up along the west side of Mindoro past the Japanese strong points around Manila. A new US airfield was in operation at Mindoro and it supplied some needed air support. The invasion force was larger this time, with 164 ships including 40 minesweepers. It met strong resistance. Japanese industry was still making many aircraft since the bombing of Japan had only recently started. At 1905, 7:05pm, 339 went to general quarters, as two enemy planes attacked the convoy. One plane came close and 339 fired its 3 inch gun and 20mm cannons without making a hit. At 1920 hours, they secured from GQ.

The next morning, January 3rd at 0725, their convoy was attacked by six planes. This time, 339 made numerous hits, and claimed one airplane shot down, a kill. That night, after midnight on the 4th, they went to GQ three times, at 0050, 0210, and 0425, each time for about 1/2 hour. No one got much sleep. That day, a jeep carrier was sunk by kamikazes.



LST's unloading on the beach at Lingayen.

HH diary: January 2nd: Two Japs came over at dusk tonight. They just dropped their eggs - which missed - and fled. The sky was again lit up, light enough to read a newspaper from the tracers. 3rd: Seven of them came over today only they didn't run off like the ones over last night did. These were carrying 100 lb bombs. They would make their dive on one ship, drop their egg, then try to suicide on the ship ahead. No hits were made with bombs. But one did suicide into a tanker. Not much damage. We received credit for bagging one before he made his turn. One suicide came close to our bow. Maybe these suicides don't do so good as far as getting ships, but they have a morale effect. Everybody shakes for an hour after. The tanker is continuing, but we had another burial at sea again today. This

took place in the Mindanao Sea, which we named "Suicide Gap". What a morning! We are going up to Lingayen three days ahead of the invasion forces and a day ahead of the big ships.

On January 5th, there was more firing at planes with no apparent hits. And at 1510 to 1650 they maneuvered at various courses and speeds "while escorts intercepted enemy ships". The "escorts" were destroyers, and the "enemy ships" were probably 19 foot plywood suicide boats as the Japanese were trying that approach as well as suicide planes. The same thing occurred between 1705 and 2020. Obviously, the Japanese were doing their best to disrupt the impending landing. That evening, three kamikazes crashed close to three minesweepers that were lucky to escape damage.

On January 6th, they arrived at Lingayen Gulf and the minesweepers went ahead. At 1315, YMS 339 commenced sweeping code area "Depressor" with minesweeping unit 10. This unit consisted of five YMS's, under tactical command of a squadron leader, who was one of the YMS captains. At 1720, they ceased sweeping. 339 was attacked throughout the day by various enemy planes. That same day, two larger minesweepers (DMS's) in the invasion force



were sunk by an airplane torpedo and a kamikaze. Two battleships, three cruisers, six destroyers, a supply ship, and another large minesweeper were hit by kamikazes, not sunk but with many killed including two skippers. Historian Samuel Eliot Morison, in his multi-volume "History of US Naval Operations in WWII", said: "this was a gruesome day for all hands in Lingayen Gulf"; and the "minesweepers bore the brunt of the attack this day, owing to their distance from support ships".

HH diary: January 6th: The planes started coming, first dropping their bombs, then strafing, then suiciding. This kept up all night. All firing and ack-ack didn't seem to do much good. They got two sweeps and one gunboat. No sleep what-so-ever during the night. It was pitch black and all we could see was the tracers from the planes as they made their strafing runs. We would just run for a box to hide under whenever we heard the patter of machine gun bullets. Oh, what a night - we had our bow riddled about three times and also the stern, but only one casualty, not due to gunfire. Crewmate Harper Gruber explained this casualty in a conversation in early 2009: Clarence Stewart was manning the port 20mm gun. Word came over the headphones that "Stewart is hit". He was carried into the galley, that served as the sick bay in combat, bleeding from his head. He had hit it when the ship rolled in a hard turn, trying to evade the attacking planes. The injury proved not serious.

On the 7th, 339 continued sweeping the same area from 0915 to 1800 hours. 339 was assigned as the mine disposal ship which meant they were responsible for shooting at and blowing up the contact mines that popped to the surface when swept. They expended 402 rounds of 20mm and 240 rounds of 50 caliber ammunition. Also on the 7th, the US surface forces, the battleships, cruisers, and destroyers, began a two day bombardment of the landing areas, along with carrier plane bombing. Again, the high velocity, flat trajectory naval shells went right over the heads of the minesweeper men. 4th of July fireworks displays probably seemed very tame in comparison to them thereafter. The big ships also attracted most of the kamikazes, so it took pressure off the landing ships.

HH diary continues: This morning we started sweeping at sunrise. We swept with five other ships the beaches near San Fernando. The big ships didn't show up on time. Oh, what a time the guns on the beach had with us small guys. But they were very poor shots. We had plenty of planes in the air, but so did the Japs. One funny sight was one of our planes and a Jap plane passing close to each other. Then the Jap came down and rammed the destroyer that was supposed to protect us. We were in between the beach and the big ships all day. Within 700 to 1200 yards off the beach with the big ships five to six miles on the other side of us. The closest we came to getting hit was by a stray shell from the Aussie cruiser. Those shells make a helluva noise as they pass overhead. The Jap guns did come close once, but we saw that they could bring their gun only so far back, so we turned before we came to that point. The enemy planes didn't bother us too much when the big ships were near. We had only three that attempted to suicide into our unit (five ships) throughout the day.

On the 8th, at 0400 to 0515, 339 searched for a possible submarine after getting a sonar sound contact. Results were negative. Another night with little sleep. From 0920 to 1730 they continued sweeping for contact and acoustic mines. Two jeep carriers were hit by suicide planes. On the 9th, 339 patrolled in the South China Sea and outer Lingayen Gulf while 68,000 landing troops went ashore at the swept beaches with no initial opposition but much fighting further inland. The amphibious group of ships stretched 40 miles to sea. Another battleship, cruiser, and destroyer were hit by suicide planes; one transport ship was hit by a suicide boat, and four other ships were damaged in accidents—in collision or by being hit by US shells, so called "friendly fire". YMS 339 anchored that night and perhaps some onboard got good sleep for the first time in over one week of action. Historian Morison reports that "the

soldiers and sailors witnessed one of those sunsets that poets write about in happier times." Brilliant orange and scarlet.

Over the following days, 339 stayed in the Lingayen Gulf area, anchoring most nights with the transport ships that were off-loading supplies for the troops. The transports sometimes made black smoke at night to protect against air attack. Kamikazes continued until the 12th, when the last 47 Japanese planes in the Philippines fled to Formosa (now Taiwan).

HH diary: January 10th: The whole beach was lit up like a city last night. A couple of Jap planes tried to come over. They were trying to make us believe that they were ours by using their running lights, but the radar showed otherwise and they were dead ducks. Early this morning we heard a plane that sounded like a Piper Cub of ours. But as it approached it dropped its egg. Although it landed closer to some other ships, we were able to see the fragments. 11th: The rest of yesterday passed by peaceful although a couple of Jap planes made sporadic attacks. This morning I think I saw the best Jap pilot in their air force. He came over, dive bombed into a sweep about four hundred yards off our port beam. After laid his egg - which hit to the right side and center of the ship - he pulled out, picked out another sweep and started his suicide. But he must have seen that he was going to over-shoot it, because at about 20 feet off the water he pulled out, went up and took after the same sweep. This time he crashed into the ship's fantail. Although both ships were damaged, they remained afloat. 12th: This afternoon we bummed some dry provisions from some bigger ships. What a job to get something to eat!



On the 12th and again on the 19th, 339 replenished at sea. Occasionally they were assigned to sweep the entrance channel repeatedly to ensure safety from mines for the supply ships that continued to come and go. Lingayen Gulf had become another forward area supply harbor without significant shore facilities, like San Pedro Bay before it. Everything that was needed was on ships. No other navy in history had ever done this on this scale, but it was becoming routine for the US Navy. Also on the 12th, Task Force 38, comprised of three fleet carrier groups, attacked the Cam Rhan Bay area in what is now Vietnam, with 850 carrier planes and sank 44 enemy ships, mostly transports.

It is perhaps ironic to note that on January 11th, in the relative safety of Boston Harbor, especially in comparison to the Philippines, YMS 14 collided with a destroyer in bad weather and sank. No one was killed. The ship's bones are still there, 30 feet down, and commercial divers take customers to the site.

On the 14th, there were heavy seas in Lingayen Gulf, as the edge of a typhoon went nearby. On the 26th, 339 replenished again. On the 27th, they marked a sunken ship with a buoy to help prevent a collision.

HH diary: January 22nd: A dead Jap came floating by us today. As a matter of fact, he floated by three times with the tide. What a stink! He was all bloated and had his face smashed in. When he came by the third time we couldn't stand the odor any more, so we opened up on him with our .50 caliber machine guns, hence sinking him. 28th: Dead bodies were floating all over the place today. We sweeps were detailed to remove them. The Japs we would shoot up and Americans we would first get all data from their dog tags, then put a weight on them and sink them. Many just disintegrated. Most of the Americans we removed were sailors. I imagine that they were killed on or about "S Day" [code date for the invasion at Lingayen Gulf]. 29th to February 1st: Same routine, sweeping main channel. 2nd to 8th: Still sweeping. The sea is fairly rough here - heavy ground swells. Still no mail. 9th - 10th: Well, I can truthfully say now that we have done everything but haul garbage. Have been laying smoke around the Big Ships.

Corregidor and Mariveles: On Sunday, February 11, 1945, YMS 339 got underway from Lingayen Gulf with a convoy at 9 knots, destination Subic Bay near Manila (see map purple arrow on page 26). US troops had landed in that area at the end of January in a series of invasions at three places. The convoy arrived on the 12th. 339 joined Task Unit 78.3.6 comprised of 21 minesweepers, 6 AM's and 15 YMS's, under the squadron command of Lieutenant Commander James Keefer.

(By coincidence, in the post-war novel "Caine Mutiny" by Herman Wouk about a minesweeper with the unhinged skipper Captain Queeg, there was a Lt. Tom Keefer. He was played by Fred Mac Murray in the movie and was a slick troublemaker. But any similarity to people living or dead is purely coincidental, as the standard disclaimer goes, and the real minesweeping Keefer did his job well by all indications).

All the sweepers, including 339, were assigned on the 13th to clear mines in the Corregidor area near the entrance to Manila Bay where bitter fighting had occurred in 1942. *HH diary: February 13th: Swept a lane into the "rock" [Corregidor] while cruisers and destroyers fired at gun emplacements. Most guns seemed silenced. Bombers hit the rock continuously throughout the day. It is reported that the enemy has many "Q" boats operating in Manila Bay. These boats are about 15 to 20 feet long, made of wood that is reported to be Philippine Teak. The bow is loaded down with explosives. Their objective is to ram a ship causing their explosive to explode. Suicide!*



Navy artist painting of YMS 48 being hit by shore artillery off Corregidor. The YMS's are firing back with their 3 inch guns.

Fortunately we weren't fired upon. We were perfect targets for machine gun fire. Two "cans" [destroyers] coming in astern of us for fire support hit mines. Although both were badly damaged they did not sink. It looks very much like these mines may be land-controlled. We went in first and neither cut them nor exploded them, but the cans following us hit them. Through out the day we could see the fires in Manila burning, although the city is over 50 miles distant.

On the 14th, minesweepers off Corregidor came under fire from enemy shore batteries. YMS 48 was so severely damaged it had to be sunk by a destroyer. That same day, 339 swept in the code "Mabel" invasion approach area. Two destroyers, escorting minesweepers were heavily damaged by mines in Mariveles Harbor, Bataan—both returned to the US for repairs after local patching and were out of action for the remainder of the war. 76 mines were destroyed in the morning alone. *HH diary: 14th: Met a little opposition today before the big ships knocked out the enemy guns. Swept the "Southern Channel" between the Rock and Luzon, south of Corregidor. The enemy trouble was coming from this point. The YMS 48 was sunk later today by gunfire from the Rock. Went into Mariveles Harbor this evening. There we cut a great number of mines. This is a very small harbor enclosed on all three sides by steep cliffs.*

On the 15th, 339 swept both "Mabel" again and in Mariveles Harbor, where the Army made an amphibious landing that morning. YMS 46 was damaged by shore batteries. *HH diary: Started the day by sweeping Mariveles before the invasion force arrived. The town looked battered, burned and uninhabited. Coming out of the harbor we got tangled up with the invasion ships. This isn't a very healthy thing to do, because at this time the guns at Corregidor opened up on the troop transports. But their shooting was erratic as no hits were scored. We did cut about a half a dozen mines. Could see the troops go ashore. The first wave emerged from their LCVs unopposed, but the second and third waves weren't as lucky. Later in the day we swept "North Channel" - between Corregidor and Bataan. Cut a great number of mines. Also met some machine gun fire. But again we proved a bad target for the Japs.*

On the 16th, 339 swept "Helen" area and cut one moored contact mine. *HH diary: Well, the curtain on the big show went up this morning about 0930. And what a show! Fortunately we were as close to the stage as could be possible. I was the cameraman today. The paratroopers came down in groups of six to eight. What a sight! They were dropped by C-47 from an altitude of about 500 ft. The men came down in parachutes of white color, while the ammunition came down in red chutes. All in all we saw only three men come down without their chutes opening. The first ones came down with their submachine guns blazing away. But all wasn't rosy for us. The Japs did put up a lot of machine gun fire although it wasn't too effective. At about an hour later troops (seaborne) were put ashore. One startling fact noted that if a man happened to miss the Rock when he came down he was immediately picked up by PT boats and put ashore.*

About one this afternoon another wave of chutists landed. About three this afternoon I saw just how our army fought. We were within one hundred yards of the beach when our troops started out to take the highest hill on the island. It wasn't much of a fight as we had them well out-numbered. But through the binoculars you could see the guys throwing hand grenades, etc. It really was a sight I'll never forget. Later, we were fired upon by AA shell of about a 6 inch caliber. Just before sunset - about two hours - tonight as we were getting ready to leave the area we witnessed the flag raising. It sent a tingling feeling through me and brought goose bumps out. This is very hard to explain unless actually witnessed, but everybody stood at attention and undoubtedly we were the happiest guys in the Pacific today! On to Subic!



Friends Radioman Jerry McCaffrey and Quartermaster Hartford Holden, looking out bridge windows over 339's bell.

On the 17th they replenished. Suicide boats sank three support ships that day. On the 18th, 339 again swept in Mariveles Harbor, also looking for any underwater obstructions, and anchored in Subic Bay afterwards. Mines were extremely heavy in this operation, especially in Mariveles, and any ship there was at serious risk. There is an old sweeper saying that "any ship can be a minesweeper—once." The sweepers did their work effectively despite the threats.

HH diary: 18th: Today proved to be a quiet day. Left Subic in early morning to sweep Mariveles Harbor. Even though we did sweep before its invasion, a number of ships have hit mines there. But now the army has control of the area surrounding it. Just before entering this harbor we saw a man in khaki adrift on a log. Upon orders we were to investigate him. As we closed in...upon him, we recognized him to be a Jap. Upon closing in to about 50 yards he took out a hand grenade, tapped it three times on the log and held it in his hand.

We see it sizzle - then the next thing we saw was a head flying one way and an arm another and blood around the log but no Jap. Hari kari! We cut a few mines today, too. One exploded nearby causing no damage. Later in the day there were Japs all over the water. Evidently they were escaping from Corregidor, but we had "cans" taking care of them. Also today I saw my first American plane go down. Evidently the pilot was wounded over Bataan and later blacked out. As he flew past he suddenly went into a spin and crashed into the sea. No trace was found. All other planes in the area flew low over this spot a couple of times, finally giving a final salute by dipping their wings and continuing their job.

For their action in the Corregidor and Bataan area from February 14 to 28, YMS 339 was awarded her second battle star. And considering the extreme danger from enemy artillery attacks and the high number of mines, 21 minesweepers in that action (6 AM's and 15 YMS's including 339), earned the Navy Unit Commendation. It is awarded "for outstanding heroism in action against the enemy", with unit performance comparable to merit the award of a Silver Star to an individual. Only two other YMS's in all of WWII received this Commendation.

This same week, another huge amphibious force landed Marines on the island of Iwo Jima. While the 7th Fleet operated in Philippine waters, the 5th Fleet drove towards Japan via islands more to the east which included Iwo Jima. Each fleet had their own assigned minesweepers. The US could afford to split its main surface forces after the defeat of the Japanese fleet in the Battle of Leyte Gulf. However, kamikaze aircraft flying from shore bases would take an increasingly deadly toll.

It is curious, to say the least, that 339 did not receive a battle star for the combat in the Lingayen Gulf invasion as well. Any days sweeping mines were dangerous. The landings there also had two days of overhead bombardment where deadly stray shells were possible. But, more importantly, there were serious air attacks and kamikazes that could have hit any ship. A staff officer would have decided which sweepers got battle stars based on after action reports by task unit heads and the judged level of danger encountered. 339 may not have been awarded a star because it was away from the beaches during the actual landing day even though it was there the days before and after, and subjected to repeated air attacks. In any case, perhaps the men of 339 were just happy to have come this far without any casualties, especially in light of the minesweepers sunk and damaged near them at Lingayen, Corregidor, and Bataan, and that was more than enough reward.

There was a story Maurice related from one of the landings. The minesweeper skippers spent time together, when they could, in port as colleagues. One of Maurice's fellow YMS captain friends chided him that, while he was well educated, he was not well read on popular literature. He gave Maurice some books to read when he had time. One was a collection of stories by James Thurber. Maurice enjoyed the story of "Walter Mitty" and his daydreaming adventures, which always involved the sound "pocketa-pocketa-pocketa". In the middle of one tense mine sweeping run, Maurice had a message sent via semaphore flags to his friend's ship. That skipper's signalman took the message to him and said: "Mr. Fitzgerald has gone crazy. I had them repeat the message, so it is correct. But it makes no sense." He handed the paper to his captain, and the only words on it were: pocketa pocketa pocketa.



Another painting, of PT boats entering smashed Manila Bay.

Manila Bay: From February 24th, when Japanese resistance in Manila ceased, to March 1st, 339 swept inside Manila Bay in areas "Frances", "Virginia", and "Lydia" (see grey arrow on page 26). Manila Bay was littered with the wrecks of Japanese ships sunk by Allied air attacks—350 vessels of all sizes had to be removed. And it was very heavily mined—584 mines were eventually found. At the end of sweeping, 339 anchored in Subic Bay. Subic was now, in turn, another forward base. It had been the principal US naval base in the western Pacific before the war. (And it would be again, as it still was in the early 1970's when LT Anne Purdy (Fitzgerald), USNR, served there as a nurse. The base was subsequently closed and turned over to the Philippines). Probably because the landings there had taken place earlier, 339 did not get a battle star for the Manila Bay operation. On March 16th, 339 went from Subic with a convoy to Leyte Gulf, anchoring on the 19th in San Pedro Bay.

Cebu invasion: 339 was in San Pedro Bay for just three days. On March 23rd, they got underway with elements of Task Force 78.2, destination Cebu Island (see map brown arrow on page 26) in the part of the Philippines known as the Viscayans. On the 26th, 339 left the Task Force and proceeded to the landing area near Talisay, Cebu Island, where Army troops landed that day after a 1.5 hour shore bombardment. From 0655 to 1705, 339 swept code areas "Orchestra" and "Balcony". On the 27th, they swept Olango Channel, and on the 28th "Stage Door" and "Orchestra" again, anchoring in Cebu Harbor with Task Unit 78.2.9. On the 29th, sweeping was done in Hilutangan Channel and Magellan Bay, and on the

30th the northeast Cebu City harbor entrance, anchoring each night. HH diary, 29th: *Listened to the news originating in the states. This news stated that there was a tank battle going on off and on in the cultivated hills south of the town of Talisay. Looking through binoculars we watched a battle but most of it was our tanks knocking out Jap strong points and our infantry following up between the treads of each tank. Only a couple of tanks were encountered and they were quickly overcome.*



Filipinos welcome US Army at Cebu City.

On April 2nd, they swept in front of an incoming convoy. Then 339 ran hard aground on Lipata Bank, near the entrance to Cebu City at 1505 hours. Today there is a large lighted buoy there to warn ships of this hazard. If there had been any buoys then, the Japanese would have removed them, to hamper any invasion.

Maurice told several times of a minesweeper captain's dilemma, a "catch 22". The Navy charts were clearly labeled "unreliable". Many were based on old British bottom soundings from years before, some actually as far back as Captain James Cook's Pacific cruises in the 18th century! Typhoons, underwater earthquakes, and shifting currents can all change bottom contours over short periods of time. But outdated charts were all that was available for many of the shallow places that minesweepers, in particular, had to go. At the same time, a captain was liable to be court-martialed if his ship ran aground—especially if in action, when a stranded minesweeper could interfere with landings—but at other times, too, since stranding makes a ship unavailable for duty and can cause hull damage. There was no good solution. A skipper had to rely on unreliable charts.

When a ship runs hard aground, it usually waits for the next high tide to try to power itself off. April 2, 1945 was five days after the full moon. Cebu tide tables for a similar period in April 2005 show that 339 likely ran aground a little after high tide, not good timing for an

easy recovery. The tables also show a swing of only about 5 feet maximum from low tide to high. And high tides would grow smaller in the following days, until closer to the new moon at mid-month. Sometimes it helps to row an anchor out in the direction of deeper water and pull on it with the windlass; or unload some weighty cargo like fuel oil. Whatever they tried didn't work. The next afternoon, April 3rd, a salvage tug was sent at high tide. It failed. On the 4th, LSM 50, a medium landing ship, 202 feet long and three times heavier than 339 and with 2,880 horsepower, succeeded. It must have been a long, stationary 48 hours. There is no official record of any damage to 339. The ship quickly went back to normal operations. No court martial proceeding was taken. The Navy was very busy, and had need for 339's continued effective service. Or perhaps, in the end, the court-martial warnings were only made to make captains worry enough to avoid those groundings that could be avoided, given the charts they had.



LSM 50 at a Philippine beach landing.

HH diary, 2nd: The unexpected happened today. We got underway and while traveling at about 12 knots we hit a reef. We advanced about a hundred yards on this reef (Lipata Bank). The tide was up when we first landed on this - about three hours ago - but it is now receding. We have a list to port of 22 degrees. When we first hit this it seemed as if the ship was going to roll over. Now we have shores holding us up. There is every reason to believe that this may be my last entry into this book. We doubt that the ship will stay upright even with the aid of shores when the tide recedes entirely. 3rd: Still on the reef. A tug attempted to pull us off today, but failed. The shores are still holding us up. When the tide goes out we have only a foot and a half of water on the bow and five feet aft, when this ship has a mean draft of almost nine feet. Pulled off the reef today at high tide by a LSM. Only damage, externally, was that both screws were badly bent. But there are no holes or cracked seams. Before we were pulled off we took off all heavy objects to lighten the displacement... All in all it looks like we get a rest and maybe some Australian duty [not to be].

Crewmate Harper Gruber recalls that the grounding occurred when 339 was attempting to beat another YMS, whose skipper was a friend of Maurice's, into the Cebu City harbor. Harper believes that after the grounding Maurice was called to explain it in person to a senior officer, but that nothing came of that except "probably a chewing out". John Holden says his sister, Jill, recalls a conversation between their father and his lifelong friend, Jerry McCaffrey from a visit in the mid-1990's: amongst the tall stories and good-natured kidding, there was an energetic argument about whether Quartermaster Holden, the keeper of the charts, should have avoided the reef or whether Radioman McCaffrey should have had the sonar working well enough to have detected it.



LSM's at a landing site in Mindanao.

For the action from March 23 to 28 in the Visayas, YMS 339 received her third battle star.

While 339 was busy at Cebu, other groups were landing troops on other Philippine islands, including Samar, Panay, and Mindanao. More than 50 landings would be made in 44 days now that the threat of kamikazes was gone in the Philippines. MacArthur's pledge to return to the Philippines had been fully realized. Also, marines and soldiers landed on the island of Okinawa, near Japan, on April 1st with the largest amphibious force of the Pacific. It would prove very costly, both ashore where the enemy held out to the last, and offshore to the fleet. The heaviest kamikaze attacks of the war took place there, launched from Japan itself, resulting in more US Navy combat deaths than in any battle in its history.

On April 7th, 339 left the Cebu area with a small convoy, arriving in San Pedro Bay, Leyte, on the 8th. *HH diary, 8th: Upon entering Leyte Gulf, I had a view of a patrol sinking a Jap sub. He made three runs over it, dropping depth charges each time. The third time the sub exploded with oil and floating objects coming to the surface. 9th: Undergoing emergency repairs. While at Leyte, they heard the news of the death of President Franklin Roosevelt on the 12th. Many ships, even the smaller ones without chaplains, held memorial services for the popular commander-in-chief. Harper Gruber remembers all flags in the fleet at half-mast.*

Mindanao landings: On April 14th, 339 got underway for the Malabang, Cotabato,

and Daveo assault areas on two coasts of Mindanao Island (see two pink arrows on page 26 map). 339 got there on April 16, waited for the arrival of Task Unit 78.2 and delivered mail to various ships once it arrived. Mail is always welcome at sea, and the Navy went to great lengths to rendezvous mail with its intended recipients as soon as it could, although that was often not possible. The next weeks were busy. Summarized below are the places that 339 swept for mines. Dates in between were spent mostly sweeping areas previously swept, or at anchor, or underway to the next area, or replenishing.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Place swept</u>	<u>Notes</u>
Apr 17	Malabang "Red Beach" landing	swept all day in various areas
May 3	Santa Cruz, Davao landing	swept Malalag Bay; TU 78.2.55
May 4	Black beach, Darong	cut 1 mine cable. Sighted enemy sub, which submerged and escaped, as 339's sonar was broken.
May 5	Talomo Bay landings	
May 6	Davao Gulf	
May 21	Pakiputan Strait to Lasang River	cut 2 mine cables.
May 28	Sarangani Is. off Mindanao	with Task Unit 78.2.53



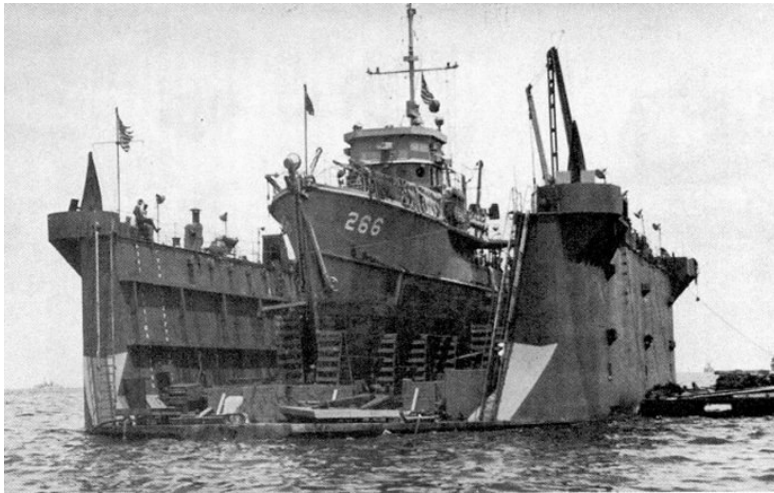
U. S. Naval Institute photo of YMS 339, obtained in 2008. The cargo ship in the near background is USS Sabik (AK-121). Matching locations for the two ships, the author concluded the picture was taken Dec. 2 to 6, 1944 near Leyte. Note: (a) 339's acoustic mine "hammer box" is deployed underwater at the bow; (b) mine sweeping gear not deployed at the stern; and (c) crew along the port rail and on the flying bridge looking at the unknown ship taking the photo.

On May 29th, YMS 339 left Mindanao en route to the small island of Morotai, in the Moluccas group, about 400 miles south of the Philippines. It had been taken from the Japanese in September 1944, and was now a fleet anchorage, far enough away from the action to have more extensive repair and refit facilities.

No battle star was forthcoming for 339 for the Mindanao landing operations but their good luck in action had certainly continued. Historians now agree that the Mindanao landings

were not strategically necessary. They were done to reward the Filipino allies by freeing more of their territory sooner rather than wait for war's end.

This would be the end of the main Philippine landings. Most landings were not contested on the beach after the landing at Leyte, except by shore batteries. The Japanese decided to fight inland rather than at the beach where naval gunfire and aerial bombing could be devastating to defending soldiers. The main objectives and population centers were all re-



Auxiliary repair ship ARD 13, with YMS 266 in its dry-dock.

taken by the Allies, with much hard fighting inland. Many defeated Japanese went to interior jungles and mountains but with few supplies. Some fighting would continue until war's end but attention was focusing elsewhere. (A few diehards refused to surrender even at war's end—the last one to be found in the Philippines was an army captain on a mountain in Mindoro in April, 1980). The newly recaptured areas would serve as jumping off points. As one example, Cebu City where 339 swept, was slated to be the staging area for three Army divisions preparing for the invasion of Japan.

Of the fighting in the Philippines to the average sailors, Morison had this to say: they “approached the landing beaches...simply as men doing a job their country had called on them to perform....They were

certainly conscious of being part of a vast war machine in the Pacific, but they also lived in the dream world of an idyllic future....Killing or getting killed, indeed war itself, still seemed strange, abnormal to the average young American. He had to “remember Pearl Harbor” or actually see a Japanese plane kill shipmates to feel angry.”

The May 4th episode when 339 sighted an enemy submarine while sweeping for mines is a reminder of another story. A minesweeper, whether 339 or another one, was holding a rare “holiday routine” while stationary in the water by itself. Some of the crew were swimming next to the ship. Suddenly nearby an enemy submarine surfaced. Both sides were equally surprised and shocked with much running around. Before a shot could be fired the submarine submerged. It made its escape before the sweeper could get going in chase. If the sweeper was 399, there is no clue in its deck logs. It may not have been 339, as there is no mention of any “holiday routine” being taken in a forward area either. However, John Holden recalls his Dad telling a very similar story (except for the swimmers); but no such event is included in the diary. There is this diary entry for May 6th involving a submarine: This evening after we had recovered our sweep gear and were returning to our anchorage at Malalag Bay a Jap sub surfaced within a mile of us off our starboard quarter. She fired two torpedoes at the sweep astern of us and also machine gun fire, but caused no damage. She submerged rapidly and the three sweeps who had sound gear and depth charges (we still are without them since Lipata Bank ordeal) attacked. They reported sinking it. To us it looked like a medium sized sub with about a ten man or better crew.



Electricians Mate Harper Gruber, nicknamed by his crewmates “Little Sparky”, told several stories in 2008 and 2009 about their time in the Philippines, including these:

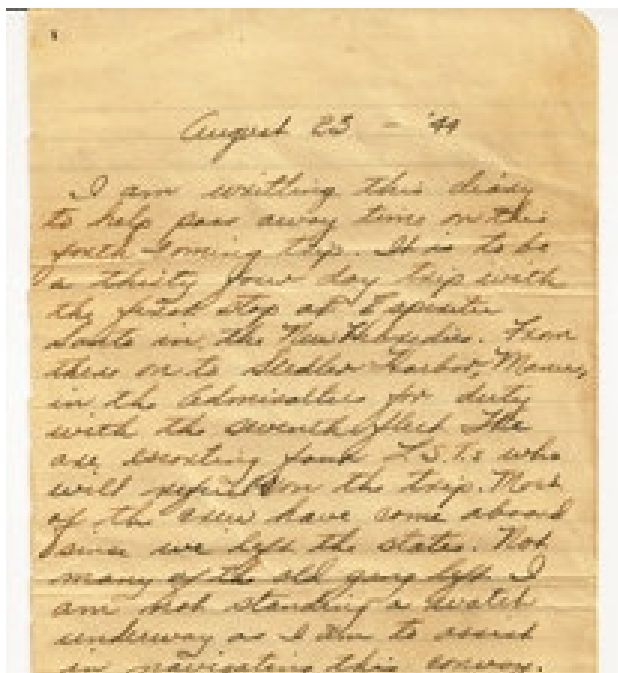
- Gunners Mate Landon Freeman got a monkey at one island that he kept as the ship's pet. “Roscoe” tried to bite the skipper one day for no apparent reason, so he was ordered ashore at the next island. But when the ship got underway, Roscoe swam after it. So Maurice let him stay. Some time later, he ate chemical marker dye used to mark swept areas and died.
- When asked if Maurice was the oldest on board, Harper said no. Almost all were younger, but Pharmacist Mate Fred Atkinson, nicknamed “Fargo Dick”, was older. He had been a street car operator in San Francisco and was well liked. As a joke, the crew practice-fired the 3 inch gun one day while Fargo was on the only crew commode, directly beneath the gun. They all had a good laugh after the concussion knocked him off the seat.
- The skipper was a good ship handler, who never had any trouble bringing 339 to piers even in strong cross-winds. Navy crews always compare their performance to their sister ships in doing that maneuver.

- Harper's hammock was amidships (other crew berthing was forward), suspended under asbestos-insulated pipes that he often bumped into.
- He came close to dying during one shore excursion on a recaptured island. He was walking around relaxing when he saw a well pump with handle just like back in South Carolina. He thought of pumping it but was distracted by something he doesn't recall now. Later that day, he learned that a sailor from another ship had tried the handle and was blown up by a booby trap. Harper says he "still thinks about it sometimes".



Some other notable HH diary entries from May: 10th: During the night a Jap Q boat slipped through the patrol vessels and suicided into a small tanker, sending it into a million pieces. No survivors were found...Received mail today. 14th: Went ashore at Malalag today and played a ball game. Was unable to find a cleared spot for a field so we waited until the tide went out and played on the beach. Defeated the YMS 9 by 3 to 1. I got three for four, but was quite rusty. 19th: The natives are just starting to return from the mountains where they have been since the Japs took over. Been eating bananas, pineapple, sugar cane, chicken and fresh eggs continuously. Trading of clothes for the articles is the way we acquire these luxuries. 30th: Left the Philippines today, enroute to Morotai. I think that this would be a good time to give a sum up of my campaign in the Philippines. I roamed in the Philippine waters for six months and a couple of days. In that time I had some tough and trying times, but I think that the toughest day I had was Jan. 5th and early morning of Jan 6th when we were under air attack almost consistently. At one time I and Mac and Pete said a Hail Mary together and were ready to give up. But surviving that I think that my greatest moment was the flag raising on Corregidor...So now I leave the Philippines. For how long I don't know, but I think that we will get a much needed rest now.

On June 2, 339 went alongside the repair tender USS Culebra Island (ARG 7) at Morotai for engine repairs. Its two diesel engines now had many hard hours on them. HH diary, June 2nd: Undergoing minor repairs. We think that we may go to Hollandia in New Guinea for a complete overhaul and a good rest [another rumor that proved false].



Part of sample page from the handwritten diary of Quartermaster Hartford Holden.

On June 4th, 339 went inside auxiliary repair dock ARD 20. More commonly known as "floating dry-docks", these vessels do repairs on ship parts below the waterline by lifting them out of the water. 339 was inside ARD 20 until June 6th "for dockage repairs" which were not specified. One wonders if this had anything to do with the grounding in April, or simply was needed by a wooden hull that had been in tropical waters for about one year since the last bottom maintenance was done. It appears to be both, and it was done in conjunction with other machinery repair work. HH diary, June 6th: No Hollandia duty for some time yet. We are now in a dry dock, scraping and painting the hull - what a job! After the floating dock, 339 went back to the repair tender and was tied up alongside until June 11th.



The stay in Morotai would not be long. 339 was slated to sweep for another invasion. They had no way to know that it would be their last and toughest. On June 11, at 0720 hours, USS YMS 339 got underway with Task Unit 78.2.9, with sailing orders to go to Borneo.

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Log of the USS GMD 339 Attached to the ComSection 4 7th Fleet
 Naval District, Wednesday 3 Jan, 1945

Hour	WIND		BAROMETER Height in Inches Thermometer, attached	TEMPERATURE		STATE OF THE WEATHER BY SYMBOLS	CLOUDS			CONDI- TION OF THE SEA
	Direction	Force		Air, dry bulb	Air, wet bulb		Forms of, by symbols	Moving from—	Amount covered, tenths	
A. M.										
4	W	2	29.7	80	78	BC	Cu	NW	6	2
8	NW	2	29.5	84	80	BC	Cu	NW	4	1
12 M.	NW	2	29.4	100	80	BC	Cu	NW	5	1
P. M.										
16	NW	2	29.0	87	80	BC	Cu	NW	5	1
20	NW	2	29.7	84	80	BC	Cu	NW	5	1
24	NW	2	29.6	83	78	BC	Cu	NW	5	1

REMARKS

0000 Proceeding in convoy, course 241, speed 10. 0300 c/c to 250
 0500 c/c to 257. 0725 AT G.Q. AS SIX enemy planes ATTACKED
 convoy. Expended 9 Rounds 3"50, 300 rounds 20 mm, 175 rounds
 50 cal. Numerous hits on various planes observed. One enemy
 plane hit by our guns was observed to fall. in its fall it was
 fired on by an AM. 0800 Squared from G.Q. 0900 MADE daily
 inspection of magazines and smokeless powder samples -
 condition normal. 0955 c/c to 350. 1625 - 1630 AT G.Q.
 2105 c/c to 353.

Examined and found to be correct.

 U. S. N.
 Commanding.

Photo of one page of 339's deck logs. This one is from Jan. 3, 1945. Signed by Maurice as "commanding". Deck logs provide very limited narrative and need to be supplemented by other sources but do show a ship's location, main activities, and the weather. "c/c" means course change, with 3 digits to indicate the gyro compass course reading in degrees. "G.Q." is general quarters, battle stations.