

# USS Laffey (DD-724)

## The Ship That Wouldn't Die

The USS Laffey (DD-724) was laid down 28 June 1943 by Bath Iron Works Corp., Bath, Maine. She was launched 21 November; sponsored by Miss Beatrice F. Laffey, daughter of Medal of Honor recipient S1c Bartlett Laffey. Commissioned 8 February 1944, Cdr. F. Julian. Becton as her first "Captain". After shakedown, the Laffey traveled the world in the war effort. She was off the beaches of Normandy on D-Day. Off Cherbourg, France where an unexploded shell bounced off her hull above the waterline and did little damage. Rescuing a badly wounded Japanese pilot off the Philippines. Firing support in Leyete Gulf and Ormoc Bay. Transported intelligence to McArthur in the Philippines. Supported landings at Mindoro and Luzon, Iwo Jima, and Kerama Retto. That is where this story begins.



Commander Frederick Julian Becton, Captain of the destroyer USS Laffey (DD 724), took the radio message his communications officer handed him on April 12, 1945, but the concerned look on the young officer's face made Becton suspect that it was not good news. Laffey, an Allen M. Sumner-class destroyer, had been screening the heavy fleet units that were bombarding Okinawa in close support of the ground forces ashore. She was the second U.S. destroyer to bear the name Laffey; the first ship had been lost off Guadalcanal in 1942.

The message told Commander Becton to detach his ship from the screening force and proceed at once to the huge naval anchorage at Kerama Retto, where he was to go alongside the destroyer Cassin Young and take aboard her fighter-director team. That could mean only one thing: Laffey had drawn duty on the

radar picket line - the most dangerous, deadly and unwanted assignment in the Okinawa campaign as far as Navy personnel were concerned.



Shortly after dawn on April 13, Becton brought his ship into the crowded harbor at Kerama Retto. Many of the ships anchored there had been battered by kamikazes while on radar picket duty. Although Laffey's crew had encountered suicide bombers at Leyte, Mindoro, Luzon and Iwo Jima, they had never before seen so many damaged ships in one place. The crewmen began to imagine what might happen to them when they went out to their assigned picket station. Morale was low, and it only got worse when they received news that President Franklin D. Roosevelt had died the day before.

As soon as Laffey tied up alongside Cassin Young, the fighter-director team of two officers and three enlisted men reported aboard, carrying with them special electronic gear. Three hundred rounds of 5-inch ammunition were also loaded aboard so that Laffey would sail with full magazines of all calibers. As Laffey prepared to depart, the skipper of Cassin Young offered some advice to Becton: 'Keep moving and keep shooting. Steam as fast as you can and shoot as fast as you can.'

A gun captain from the destroyer Purdy, which was anchored nearby, also offered his thoughts about picket duty. Purdy had been struck by a kamikaze on April 12, killing 13 and wounding 270. He told the Laffey crewmen: 'You guys have a fighting chance, but they'll keep on coming till they get you. You'll knock a lot of them down, and you'll think you're doing fine. But in the end there'll be this one bastard with your name on his ticket.' After all the horrific stories the crew had heard while in the anchorage, they were almost relieved when Laffey steamed north toward her assigned area, radar picket station No. 1.

On April 14, Laffey, accompanied by LCS 51 (landing craft, support) and LCS 116, arrived on station 51 miles north of Point Bolo on south-central Okinawa, which was used as a reference point in aligning the 16 picket sectors. Laffey relieved the destroyer-minelayer J. William Ditter (DM 31), whose skipper

informed Becton by radio that during his time on station no kamikazes had entered the area, nor had any been detected by radar.



Becton hoped his ship would be as lucky, but at the same time he felt he should speak to his crew about the battle that was bound to come. He pressed the microphone button, and throughout the ship boomed the familiar words, 'This is the captain speaking.' Becton warned his crew not to expect the same kind of luck Ditter had had. He told them that he expected to see plenty of Japanese but that he had confidence in the crew's ability. They had tangled with the enemy before and won. They were now going to make the Japanese wish they had never heard of USS Laffey. In conclusion, Becton said: 'We're going to outmaneuver and outshoot them. They are going to go down, but we aren't.'

A short while later three bogeys appeared on the radar scope, but Laffey had no Combat Air Patrol (CAP) planes with her. Fifty miles to the east, however, there was a group of CAP planes with the destroyer Bryant (DD 665) on picket station No. 3. Becton requested their assistance, and the fighter-director team sent them toward the Japanese. All enemy planes were shot down. Not long after that, the radar operator reported eight more enemy aircraft approaching, and again Becton requested Bryant's CAP planes. The fighter-director team vectored them in, and they destroyed all the aircraft. By the end of Laffey's first day on picket duty, 11 planes had been shot down, but Laffey's gunners had not yet fired a shot.



No enemy action occurred the next day, Sunday, April 15. The crew's routine was broken only when Laffey was ordered to steam a few miles east to investigate a patrol plane's report that a downed Japanese aircraft was in the water. The plane was found with its dead pilot still strapped in the cockpit. Laffey's crew recovered an aircraft code book and other miscellaneous items that they would turn over to the intelligence section ashore, then sank the plane.

Monday morning began quietly on radar picket station No. 1. The whole crew was able to eat breakfast without any interruptions from the enemy. Then, at 8:25 a.m., the radar operator reported a solid cluster of pips too numerous to count approaching at 17,000 yards. It was a group of 165 kamikazes and 150 other enemy aircraft coming in fast from the north. The fighter-director team's two officers requested more help from CAP. They were informed that fighters would be sent to intercept the huge onrushing formation, but it would take time for the CAP planes to arrive in the area. Meanwhile, Laffey and her two support craft would have to deal with the enemy on their own.

At 8:30, four Aichi D3A 'Val' dive bombers broke off from the oncoming group and headed for Laffey, which was steaming along at flank speed. Two came in from the bow and two from the stern in a coordinated attack. Becton ordered hard left rudder, bringing the destroyer broadside to the planes, and the two forward 5-inch guns downed two of the Vals at about 3,000 yards. The stern 5-inch gun shot down the third kamikaze, and the 20mm and 40mm mounts downed the fourth with an assist from the gunners on LCS 51.



There was no time to rejoice over that success, however, because two more attackers, Yokosuka D4Y 'Judy' dive bombers, were coming in fast - one from the starboard beam and one from the port beam. When the Judy on the starboard side got within range of the 20mm and 40mm guns, it was torn apart by converging fire and crashed into the sea. The gunners' attention then shifted to port to assist with the second Judy, as it came in bobbing and weaving. The Japanese pilot strafed the ship, peppering the superstructure and wounding several men. The 20mm and 40mm guns finally downed the plane about 50

yards out, but just before hitting the water, the pilot released a bomb that sent shrapnel flying everywhere, wounding several more men and knocking others off their feet. The explosion also knocked out the SG radar, which was needed to detect low-flying aircraft.

The next attacker, another Val, came streaking in on the port beam. All three 5-inch guns opened fire, and as the plane came closer, the 20mm and 40mm mounts joined in. It looked as if the pilot was aiming to slam into the aft 5-inch gun, but he came in just a bit high and only grazed the top of it before smashing into the sea off the starboard side, killing one man in the gun crew. The eighth attacker, a Judy, came skimming in low over the water on the starboard beam. The 20mm and 40mm guns were hitting the plane, and finally, after a hit in the gas tank, the Judy burst into a fireball and crashed into the sea. Laffey's crewmen felt as if they had been battling the enemy for hours, but it was only 8:42, just 12 minutes since the attacks had started.



There was a respite of about three minutes before the next attacker, another Val, came boring in off the port bow. The portside guns raked the plane, which shuddered and twisted but kept coming, even as gasoline poured from one wing tank. The pilot cleared the portside 20mm and 40mm mounts and crashed into the 20mm mounts amidships, killing three gunners before sliding into the sea. Flaming gasoline was everywhere, and black smoke engulfed the area. Two 40mm mounts were wrecked and out of operation, as were two 20mm mounts.

The ammunition racks around the gun tubs were filled with clips of shells, which were in danger of exploding due to the heat. Damage-control crewmen began to heave the clips over the side of the ship. Some of them were so hot that the men had to protect their hands with rags. As some of the ammunition exploded and blew holes in the deck, flaming gasoline poured into a magazine below. Fortunately, the ammo was packed in metal cans that resisted the heat until a damage-control party arrived and hosed down the containers, thereby avoiding disaster.

Communications were knocked out in the forward engine room, but that did not present a problem for the moment. The engineers decided to adjust the ship's speed according to the sound of the gunfire they heard. If it was loud and fast, they would increase the speed. A more immediate problem was the smoke

and fumes being sucked into the engine rooms by the ventilators. Machinist's Mate John Michel, in the aft engine room, shut down the supply fans. The temperature soon reached 130 degrees and kept climbing as Michel worked his way through the dense smoke, located the controls for the exhaust fans and turned them on. The smoke began to clear and the temperature began to fall. Knowing that the smoke would undoubtedly attract more kamikazes, Becton reduced the ship's speed to avoid fanning the flames.



Just as the crew was beginning to get the situation under control, two more kamikazes, both Vals, struck. One came in from astern low and fast, just a few feet above the water. The gunners of the three after 20mm mounts hit him with accurate fire, and parts of the plane broke off, but the pilot kept boring in. He plowed through the three mounts, killing the gun crews, and rammed into a 5-inch gun. The bomb he was carrying exploded, causing the plane to disintegrate and throwing gun captain Larry Delewski clear of danger. Fortunately, he was unhurt. Another man was blown overboard, but he was picked up by LCS 51, along with another crewman who had gone overboard earlier.

Flaming gasoline covered Laffey's fantail and aft gun mount, sending more black smoke billowing into the air. The fires threatened a magazine below the mount, so firefighters flooded it, preventing an explosion that could have torn the ship apart. The situation was about to get worse, however, because the 11th kamikaze came crashing aboard at almost the same spot. That plane's bomb wiped out the mount's gun crew and wounded several others. The damage-control parties had no time to take a breather.

About two minutes later, another Val came gliding in from astern, probably because the guns were out of commission there. The pilot dropped his bomb and sped away. The bomb detonated on the stern just above Laffey's propeller, severing the electrical cables and hydraulic lines that controlled the ship's rudder mechanism. The rudder jammed at 26 degrees left, and the ship began to steam in a circle, still able to maintain speed but without control. Although crewmen began to work on it at once, their efforts were fruitless. The rudder was jammed tight and could not be moved.



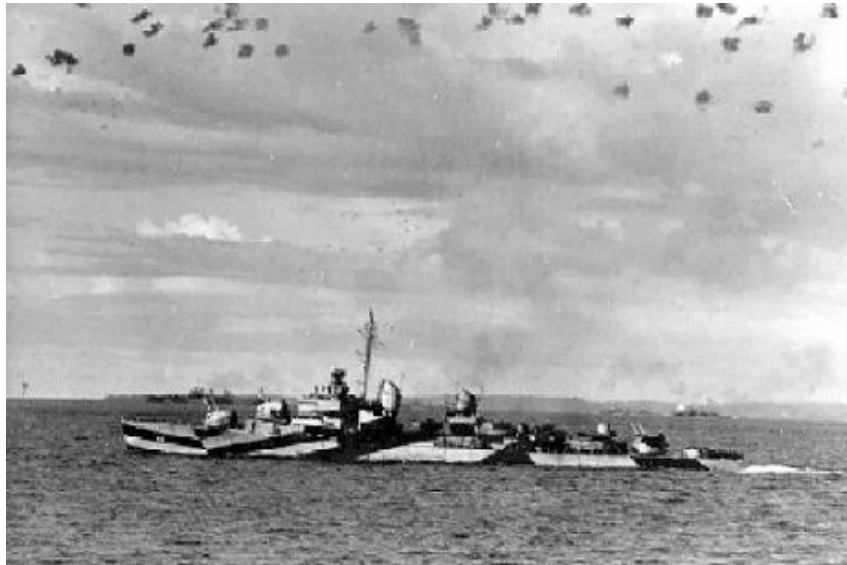


The smoke and flames must have indicated to the attackers that Laffey was nearly done for, but they did not ease off. Two more planes came roaring in from the port quarter, and every gun that could be brought to bear on the attackers poured out a steady stream of flak, but to no avail. The first plane slammed into the aft deckhouse, exploding in a ball of fire. Seconds later, the other plane crashed into the ship in almost the same spot. Gasoline from both planes produced roaring fires that covered the whole aft part of the ship.

Machinist's Mates George Logan and Stephen Waite, who had been battling fires in the aft living spaces, became trapped when the escape hatches buckled. They went to the emergency diesel generator room and secured the watertight door behind them. There was no light or ventilation and no way out, but there was a telephone that still worked, and they got through to the aft engine room. John Michel went to work again, this time with some help from Machinist's Mate Buford Thompson. They chiseled a hole through the bulkhead and passed an air hose in to the trapped men. Meanwhile, Machinist's Mates Art Hogan and Elton Peeler used cutting torches to make a hole in the deck and then pulled Logan and Waite to safety.

At the same time, a Nakajima Ki-43 'Oscar' was streaking in from the port bow with a CAP Vought F4U Corsair on its tail. The port side 20mm and 40mm mounts were sending up a steady barrage while trying not to hit the Corsair. This Japanese pilot did not drop down and ram the bridge but zoomed up and over it, shearing off the port yardarm on Laffey's mast, which came crashing down to the deck, taking the American flag with it. As the Corsair zoomed by, it hit the air-search radar antenna and knocked it to the deck below. After he cleared Laffey, the Japanese pilot lost altitude quickly and crashed into the sea, while the Corsair pilot managed to pull up and bail out before his plane hit the water farther away. Signalman Tom McCarthy saw Laffey's colors fall to the deck and wasted no time in remedying the situation. He grabbed a new flag from the flag locker, shinnied up the mast and attached the new colors with a piece of line.

As he watched the Corsair chase the last attacker, Becton realized that his CAP planes, which had been spread thinly and even lured out of position at times, were now beginning to furnish some close support. That did not mean that Laffey was out of trouble, however. As if to prove the point, another Judy came in fast on the port beam, with a Corsair hot on its tail. The portside 20mm and 40mm mounts and the Corsair were hitting the Judy, which splashed into the water about 50 yards away from Laffey. Shrapnel from the Judy's bomb severed all communications to Laffey's two remaining 5-inch guns, as well as wounded the crews who were still working the hot 20mm and 40mm guns. Three gunner's mates were also wounded.



Ensign Jim Townsley quickly jury-rigged a substitute system for communicating with the gun mounts. With a microphone strapped around his neck and plugged into the ship's loudspeaker system, he climbed atop the pilothouse, from where he could see the onrushing attackers, and directed the gunfire from there. The 17th attacker was eliminated as he bore in from the starboard side. The plane took a direct hit from a manually trained 5-inch gun, with an assist from the 20mm and 40mm mounts.

Two more kamikazes, both Oscars, came streaking in, one from the starboard beam and one from the starboard bow. The attacker on the starboard beam was hit with a 5-inch round head-on in the propeller and engine and blew apart. Mount captain Warren Walker shouted: 'We got the SOB! What a beautiful sight!' Meanwhile, another gun had the other attacker in its sights as the plane came diving in. Even though the electrical controls were out and the gun was being operated manually, it took only two rounds to finish off the attacker. As the plane exploded, the gun's trainer, Andy Stash, yelled excitedly: 'We got him! We got him! Did you see that bastard explode?'

In the brief lull that followed, assistant communications officer Lieutenant Frank Manson arrived on the bridge to report to the skipper. When Manson finished talking, he hesitated a bit and then added: 'Captain, we're in pretty bad shape aft. Do you think we'll have to abandon ship?' Becton quickly replied: 'Hell no, Frank. We still have guns that can shoot. I'll never abandon ship as long as a gun will fire.' Relieved, the Lieutenant went back to his duties.

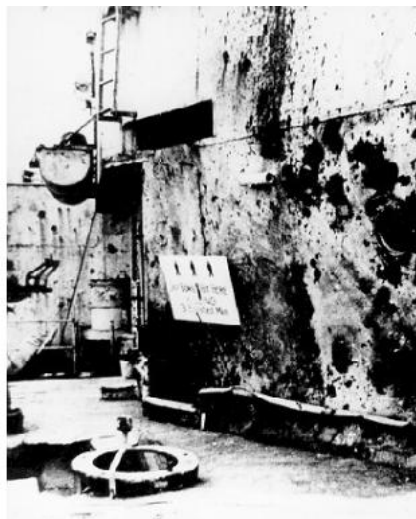


The battle was not over yet. The 20th attacker, another Val, came gliding in from dead astern. Both the sun and the thick smoke helped to conceal the plane from the gunners. The pilot dropped his bomb, blasting an 8-by-10-foot hole in the already battered fantail. As he passed low over the length of the ship, he clipped off the starboard yardarm. He didn't get far; a Corsair seemed to come out of nowhere to shoot him down several hundred yards off the starboard bow. Shrapnel from the bomb hit the emergency sick bay that the ship's medical officer, Lieutenant Matt Darnell, had set up topside. Fragments severed the tips of two of the doctor's fingers. Bandaging the bloody stumps, he calmly asked the astonished pharmacist's mate who was assisting him, 'Who's next?'

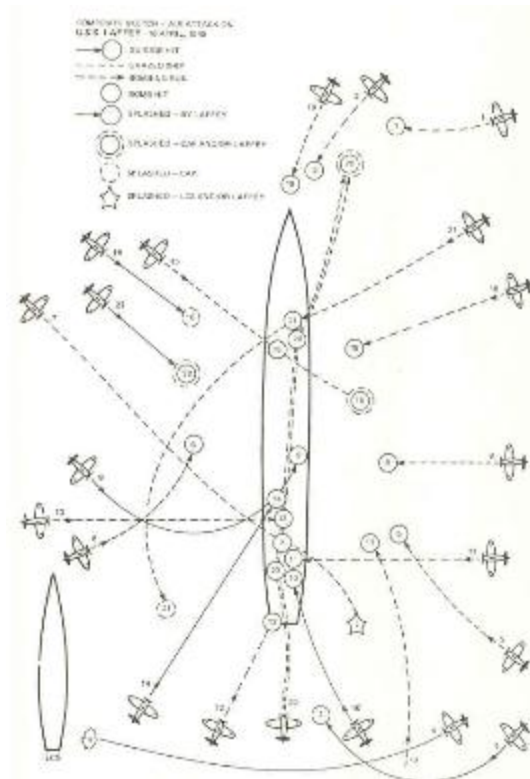
The 21st attacker, another Val, strafed the ship as it came in off the starboard bow, aiming straight for the bridge. Seaman Feline Salcido, the bridge lookout, did not think that the captain saw the plane coming. He put his hand on the back of Becton's neck and shouted, 'Down, captain, down!' As they both crouched low, a violent explosion rocked the bridge. The plane had dropped a bomb, killing one 20mm gun crew and wounding members of another nearby crew. That Val did not get away either; a Corsair pounced on him and finished him off.

The last plane was a Judy, which strafed Laffey as it came in from the port side. Although the port 20mm and 40mm guns put out a steady stream of fire, the attacker kept getting closer. Just when it seemed that the gunners were goners, a Corsair came roaring in with all guns blazing and blew up the Judy in midair.

By the end of the 22nd attack, the situation aboard Laffey was critical. The fires still raged, the stern was down due to flooded aft compartments, many guns no longer functioned and the rudder was still jammed at 26 degrees. Amid all the confusion and noise, Becton heard what sounded like many planes diving at once. Laffey could not absorb any more punishment. Sonarman Charlie Bell, Becton's telephone talker, provided him with the encouraging news he so desperately needed. 'Captain, look what's up there,' he said, pointing skyward. The weary skipper looked up to see 24 CAP Marine Corsairs and Navy Grumman F6F Hellcats just arriving to lend a hand to the few planes already on station. The Japanese had had enough and were hightailing it out of the area with the CAP planes in hot pursuit.



Laffey's crewmen could not contain their jubilation. Shouts of 'Get the bastards! Rip 'em up! Nail 'em!' rose above the din of the receding battle. It was finally over, and the grim toll was staggering: 80 minutes of continuous air attack, 22 separate attacks, six kamikazes crashed into the ship and four bomb hits. But Laffey's gunners had shot down nine attackers. The ship's casualties totaled 32 dead and 71 wounded. Amazingly, eight guns were still able to fire. LCS 51 came alongside to help fight the fires, but the little vessel had also been hit and could only offer limited help.



The destroyer-minesweeper Macomb took Laffey in tow and headed for the Kerama Retto anchorage shortly after noon. The tugs Pakana (ATF 108) and Tawakoni (ATF 114) were dispatched to bring in Laffey. Using pumps, they got the flooding under control aboard the badly damaged ship. The jammed rudder caused towing problems, but it was still possible to maintain a forward speed of 4 knots.

At 6:14 the following morning, April 17, Laffey entered the harbor at Kerama Retto. Men gazed in amazement at the battered newcomer. It just did not seem possible that a ship could have taken so much punishment and survived; one kamikaze hit was often enough to sink a ship. Laffey's escorts on radar picket station No. 1 had also suffered during the agonizing ordeal. LCS 51 had a 7-foot hole in her port side amidships, and three of her sailors had been wounded. LCS 116 had suffered topside damage, along with 17 dead and 12 wounded.

Shortly after sunrise, when Laffey was safely at anchor, the crew went aboard the tug Tawakoni for breakfast, their first real meal in almost 24 hours. Later that morning, a chaplain came aboard to conduct services for those killed or missing in action.

By April 22, six days after her ordeal on the picket line, Laffey had undergone enough repairs to depart for Saipan. At Saipan more repair work was performed, especially on the battered fantail. Laffey's next stop was Pearl Harbor, where the crew was warmly welcomed and entertained while the ship underwent further patching to ensure its safe passage back to the West Coast.

On Friday, May 25, 1945, Laffey moored at Pier 48 in Seattle, WA. 39 days after her fight for survival on radar picket station No. 1. Before additional repairs were begun, the battered ship was thrown open for viewing by the public.



Some naval officials believed that defense workers had been easing off in their production efforts since V-E Day on May 8, and they had been searching for a way to remind everyone that the war was far from over. After seeing Laffey's condition, everyone got the message loud and clear.

For her outstanding performance on the picket line, Laffey was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation. Eighteen members of her crew received Bronze Stars, six received Silver Stars, two received Navy Crosses and one received the Navy Commendation Medal.

[Source: This article was written by Dale P. Harper and originally appeared in the March 1998 issue of World War II magazine | August 2, 2016 ++]