

US HISTORY
MID-TERM PROJECT
ON
WORLD WAR II

THE WAR OF THE GULF OF LEYTE

THE U.S.S. HOEL, THE LAST STAND OF
THE TIN CAN SAILORS, AND LT. BILL SANDERS
ANOTHER AMERICAN HERO
AND PART OF HIS STORY

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INTRODUCTION

Mirna and I chose to research the Naval Battle of Leyte Gulf, also known as the Battle off Samar. Of all the battles of WWII I wanted to research this one because I found out that I had a great great uncle that was on a destroyer in this battle. What we learned was more than my family ever knew about his last battle. We found a story of amazing courage, determination and sacrifice.

Mirna will give you a general account of the Battle of Leyte and I will tell you about one part of this battle through the eyes of the destroyer, USS Hoel.

THE U.S.S. HOEL THE PHILIPPINE'S SAMAR "BATTLE OF LEYTE GULF"

The United States came into the war upon the bombing of our forces at Pearl Harbor. As a result, the U.S. was faced with fighting a war on many fronts, in Europe, in the Atlantic, Africa, and in the Pacific.

“The Japanese had invaded China’s Manchuria, the Philippine Islands, and attacked Pearl Harbor. As a result, the Japanese navy, army, and air force were depleted and spread thin. Supplies of oil and manufactured goods to supply Japan’s machinery and troops was sparse and unsecured. As part of Japan’s Imperial Empire the pacific islands were very important and were to be held at all costs”. (*2nd World War*, editor of Life Books; paraphrased)

The Pacific war covered a huge area. In the months and years after the attack on Pearl Harbor the Japanese empire had conquered hundreds of islands scattered across the Pacific. In order for the U.S. to move against Japan it needed island bases to build air fields on so that air power could cut supplies to enemy troops.

THE BATTLE PLAN

President Roosevelt considered two battle plans, each designed to establish a sizeable base from which to invade Japan. He chose General MacArthur’s proposal over Admiral Nimitz’s proposal. Nimitz wanted

Formosa as an invasion point. MacArthur's plan chose the Philippines as the base location to attack the Japanese mainland.

The Philippine Islands, located off the coast of China, is made up of many islands. The two largest are Luzon and Mindanao. Between these two islands are many smaller islands, including Samar. At Samar Island is the Gulf of Leyte.

THE BATTLE OF LEYTE GULF

In the Battle of Leyte Gulf there was plenty of gamesmanship between the U.S. and Japanese forces. This battle is the largest recorded naval battle of all time and took place between October 23 and October 25, 1944

The Japanese used part of their fleet as decoys and the U.S. used part of the Allied fleet as decoys. However, in the end, the Allies out gamed and out decoyed the maneuvers of Japan's Imperial forces. The Battle of Leyte Gulf was a crushing defeat for the Japanese, who has deployed 64 ships and lost 4 aircraft carriers, 3 battleships, 6 heavy cruisers, 4 light cruisers, 11 destroyers, one submarine and about 500 aircraft, together with 10,500 men. The Allies had deployed 218 ships and their losses were one light carrier, 2 escort carries, two destroyers, one destroyer escort, and about 200 aircraft. About 2,800 men were killed and about 1,000 wounded. It was in this battle that the Japanese used a new tactic, the Kamikaze, or suicide pilots, filled with bombs to crash into Allied ships.

THE BATTLE OFF SAMAR - OCTOBER 25, 1944 AS RECORDED BY THE USS HOEL

My great great uncle, Lieutenant William Sanders was the chief gunnery officer on the USS Hoel. The Hoel was a Fletcher class destroyer. I found out some amazing things about his ship, my uncle, and the role his ship had in defeating the Japanese fleet off the coast of the Philippine Islands.

The USS Hoel had its beginnings in the Bay Area back when it had huge shipyards. It was built at Bethlehem Steel in San Francisco. It was commissioned July 29, 1943. The Hoel was immediately sent into action in the Pacific war engagements.

As General MacArthur prepared U.S. forces to invade the Philippines, the USS Hoel joined Rear Admiral Thomas Spragues escort carrier group. Admiral Spragues Task Group was made up of 3 units. They began operating off Samar to give air support for the troop landings at Leyte.

The Hoel was part of the Northern most unit, called Taffy 3. Taffy 2 and 1 were positioned in more southern waters. The Hoel's group was composed of 13 ships: 6 escort carriers, 3 destroyers and 4 destroyer escorts. The 6 carriers were small aircraft carriers also called, baby flat tops. The destroyers' job was to protect the aircraft carriers at all costs. Destroyers were also called "tin cans".

Admiral Sprague was under the assumption that Admiral Halsey's 3rd fleet was providing protection to the north. He didn't know that Halsey's carrier had been decoyed north to attack Ozawa's approaching Japanese carriers.

Because of this, the task unit, Taffy 3 was caught off guard from Kurita's powerful force of 23 battleships, heavy cruisers, light cruisers, and destroyers.

This is what happened, as recorded by the USS Hoel on October 25, 1944.

At 0645 the Hoel was suddenly attacked by heavy fire. The only chance of survival was fleeing south, hoping to get aid from Taffy 1 and 2 units. Our carriers launched all their available planes to attack the Japanese adversaries. The destroyers worked to lay down a smoke screen to hide the U.S. aircraft carriers. At 0706 a strong rain squall also helped to hide the carriers.

Admiral Sprague boldly ordered his 3 destroyers to attack with torpedoes. A destroyer was never meant to go toe-to-toe with battleships and cruisers. But that is exactly what they did. The Hoel headed straight for the nearest enemy battleship, the Kongo. She opened fire, continuing to race towards the much larger 14 inch guns of the Kongo. The Hoel was hit first on the bridge, knocking out all radio communications. Knowing she was doomed, the Hoel turned to engage the enemy's heavy cruisers. As the cruiser, Haguro, approached the destroyer launched its final torpedoes "hot, straight, and normal" hitting the Haguro.

Crippled and surrounded by enemy cruisers and destroyers, the Hoel fought valiantly by drawing fire away from the U.S. carriers, peppering the Japanese ships with her 2 remaining guns. Finally after 2 hours and over 40 hits, her captain ordered his crew to abandon ship. At 0855 the Hoel sank in 4000 fathoms. Only 86

men survived while 253 officers and crew died with their ship. My great great Uncle was one of those men that went down with his ship.

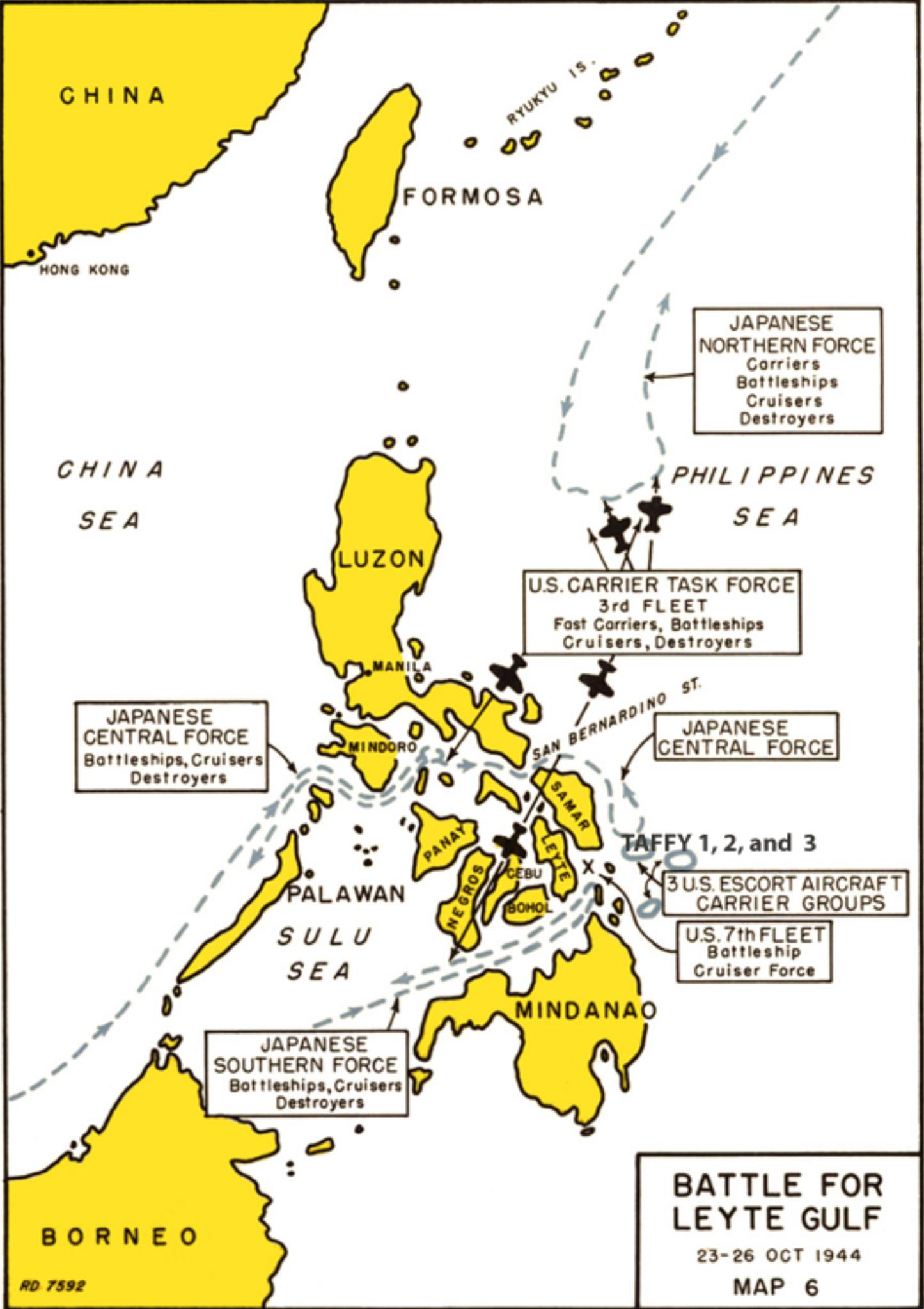
Because of the research for this project, we found a newly published book about this battle. It is called, *The Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors*. I was surprised to find out not only that Lieutenant Sanders was mentioned in the book, but it also told of the important role he had in the battle. In fact, when the order came to abandon ship a gunnery mate found my great great uncle fatally wounded, but still alive at the place where gun 52 had been blown up. The sailor asked if he could help and his gunnery officer responded, “No, the word was to abandon ship”. These were his last words.

CONCLUSION

The specific battle in which the destroyer Hoel was sunk is known as the Battle Off Samar and one of the engagements of the Battle of Leyte Gulf. Naval historians claim that this was the greatest naval battle ever fought.

Commander Kintenberer said of his men, “Fully cognizant of the inevitable result of engaging such a vastly superior forces, these men performed their assigned duties coolly and efficiently until their ship was shot from under them.”

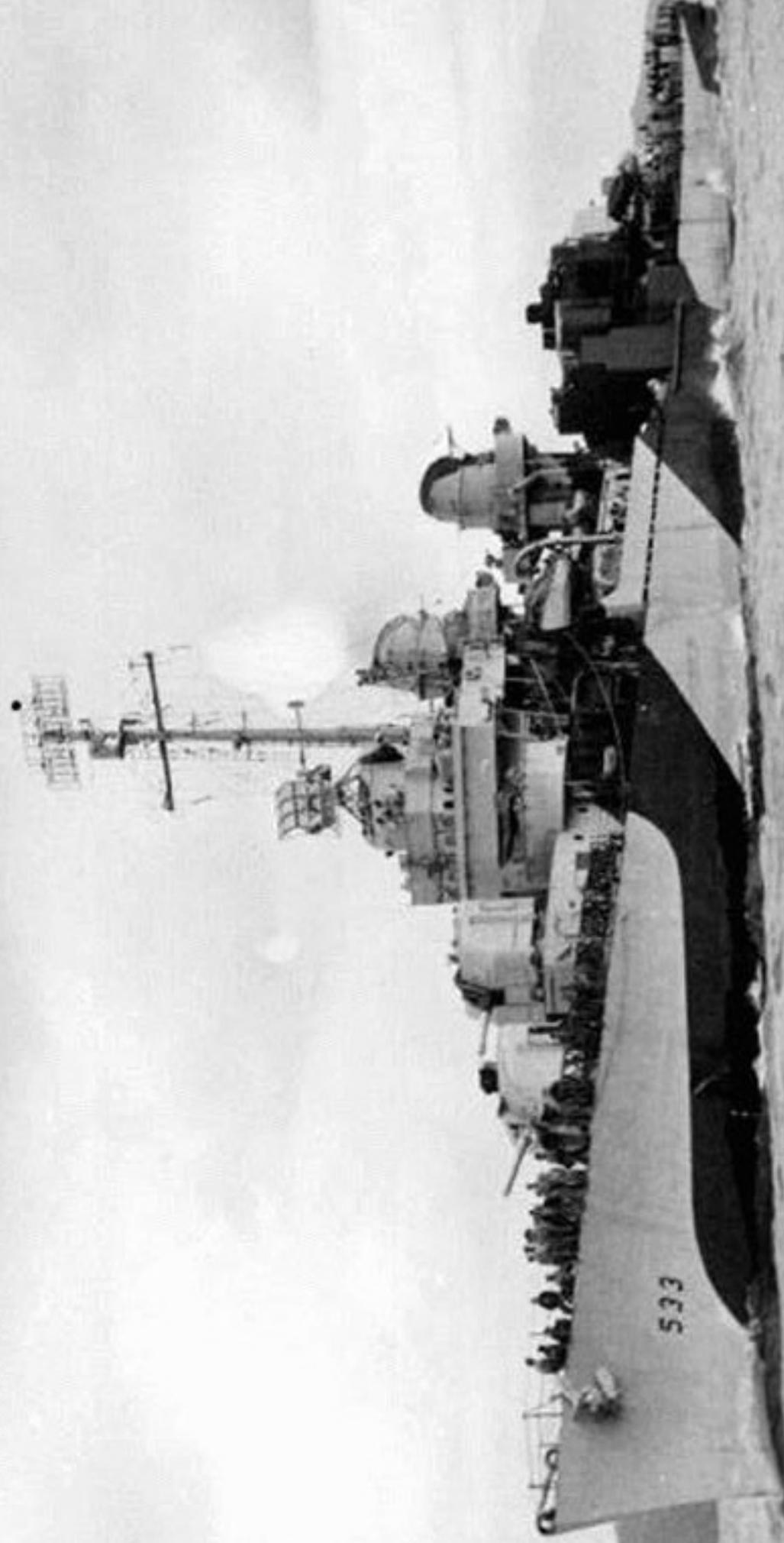
The Japanese Imperial Navy was only able to play a minor part in the defense of Japan’s interest. But an American destroyer, the USS Hoel was full of heroes and was a major player in the outcome at the Gulf of Leyte.

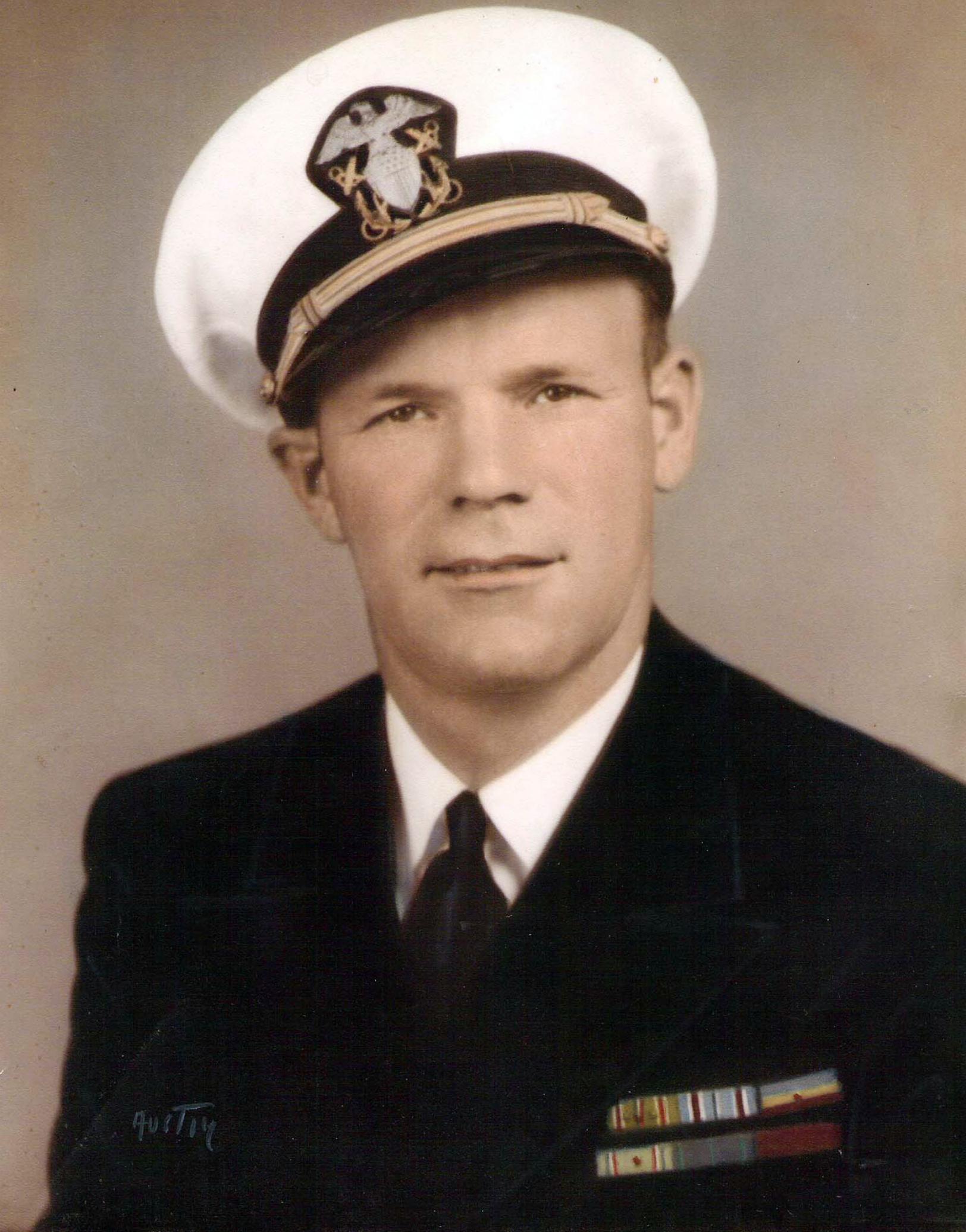


BATTLE FOR LEYTE GULF
 23-26 OCT 1944
 MAP 6

USS Hoel DD 533 (Fletcher class)

USS Hoel (DD 533) USN Photo.





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