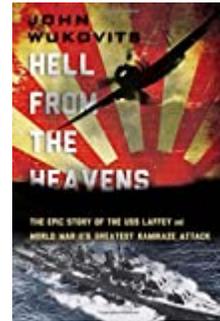


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**John F. Wukovits.** *Hell from the Heavens: The Epic Story of the USS Laffey and World War II's Greatest Kamikaze Attack.* Boston: Da Capo Press, 2015. xvii + 296 pp. \$25.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-306-82324-4.



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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

John Wukovits chronicles the story of the USS *Laffey* in *Hell From the Heavens: The Epic Story of the USS Laffey and World War II's Greatest Kamikaze Attack*. The book, Wukovits's eighth, follows the World War II destroyer from its commissioning through its service off the coast of Normandy, the Philippines, and eventually, Okinawa. It offers a compelling tale of bravery and tenacity.

Wukovits's story begins with the ship's captain, Commander F. Julian Becton. In the naval battle of Guadalcanal in November 1942, Becton watched the crew of an earlier destroyer of the same name—USS *Laffey* (DD-459)—fight with admirable courage. While that ship eventually sank off Guadalcanal, the crew's performance so inspired Becton that he vowed to lead with equal bravery. He took command of a newly commissioned USS *Laffey* (DD-724) in February 1944, and remained its only captain throughout World War II.

After an initial training cruise around Bermuda, the *Laffey* joined Destroyer Division 119 and set sail for European waters. Here, the destroyer escorted landing craft taking the US Army's 4th Infantry Division ashore at Utah Beach on June 6, 1944, and provided shore bombardment during the successful landings. Once American forces established a secure beachhead and moved in-

land, however, the navy ordered the now-seasoned *Laffey* to perform similar duties in the Pacific war.

As a destroyer, the *Laffey* served as a screen for larger ships in convoys and provided shore bombardment to support ground forces ashore. The ship performed this role for MacArthur's advance through the western Philippines, first for the landings at Ormoc, then Mindoro Island, and finally, Lingayen Gulf. These Philippine missions first exposed the *Laffey*'s crew to Japanese kamikaze attacks. While they emerged unscathed, the crew members witnessed the horrific damage kamikaze attacks exacted on a number of the *Laffey*'s sister ships. Yet the destroyer also supported brief air strikes against Iwo Jima and Tokyo where they encountered very little resistance. Thus, the crew half expected a similarly light response when initially ordered to support the American invasion of Okinawa. Unfortunately, one of the most fearsome attacks of the war awaited them.

Wukovits devotes almost a third of his 232-page narrative to a description of the *Laffey*'s fight against kamikaze aircraft on April 16, 1945. Off the coast of Okinawa, the destroyer's crew initially splashed eight Japanese aircraft without sustaining any damage. But, the kamikaze attacks kept coming. Twenty-two total

aircraft assaulted the *Laffey* for eighty minutes. The ship remained afloat but heavily damaged as six aircraft slammed into the ship and others dropped bombs. Becton's crew suffered 104 casualties, including thirty-two dead crewmembers. Yet they exhibited the same courage and devotion to duty that Becton had admired in the previous USS *Laffey* crew.

Wukovits offers a very well written account of the USS *Laffey*, making extensive use of personal interviews that the author conducted with former members of the ship's crew. Indeed, his moment-by-moment account of the April 16 kamikaze attack almost places the reader at the scene. The book, however, does not provide any real analysis of the events described. For example, the centrality of Japanese kamikaze attacks to the story pro-

vided a great opportunity to explore the psychological effects these attacks had on American personnel in the Pacific. Yet Wukovits only briefly alludes to these fears. Moreover, his portrayal of Commander Becton borders, at times, on the hagiographic. While Becton seems to have been widely admired by his subordinates, the narrative might have benefited from a more nuanced portrayal of his leadership.

Ultimately, however, the book provides an enjoyable narrative that will appeal to those with a general interest in World War II, naval history, or the Pacific war in particular. As noted, its strength is its storytelling, which Wukovits does very well. Thus, it offers a strong narrative for a popular history audience, if nothing new for scholars.

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