

# A Makeshift Aircraft Carrier

## Leo Copeland

In the beginning of World War II, our country wasn't prepared for war. The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor plunged us into an all out war causing other changes. Factories which were producing peace time products quickly began building aircraft and ships and tanks. Scrap metal was gathered from the farms and factories and converted into arms and ammunition. In a matter of a few weeks America was as well or better equipped than the enemy.

The draft boards weren't looking for a "few good men," they wanted as many men as they could get. Therefore when W.D. Mills was in high school at Loop, a recruiter came to school and gathered up the eligible boys, put them on a bus and took them to Lubbock to be examined for military service.

After graduation, Mills along with about 30 boys mostly from Gaines and Terry Counties were sent to El Paso to be inducted into the military. Mills was taken into the US Navy. He said it was because he was only 5' 11" tall. The Navy wanted people who could get up and down the ladders and through the hatches of ships.

From El Paso they went to Naval Training Station in San Diego. Afterwards, he was placed aboard the USS Nehenta Bay, an escort aircraft carrier number 78. It was one of sev-

eral old tanker ships brought in, cleaned up and fitted with flight decks. He thought there were about 60 of these ships built.



When he was assigned to the Nehenta Bay, the ship was in dry dock. As they approached the hill overlooking the dry dock where the ship was being worked on, the scene wasn't very encouraging. It had been damaged in the South China Sea, the forward elevator had fallen and some of the steel plates on the side of the ship had been damaged. He said, "If there was one welder working on it there was a thousand. It was lit up like a Christmas Tree."

The war was about half over when Mill's ship left the port. They were escorting military personnel, tankers and fuel ships to the war zone. They carried 16 two man bombers and about 30 fighter planes with a crew of

about 900 men and full supplies. The ship was completely loaded and the water was almost up to the flight deck.

They headed for the South China Sea which was called "Dragon Water." It seems there was a Chinese superstition which said a dragon holds power over the waters of the sea and causes such calamities as water spouts and Typhoons. Mills likened it to the legend of the Bermuda Triangle in our part of the world. He added, "Nothing really bad happened to us while we were there."

They did, however, encounter a typhoon. They put out two "floating" anchors, one on either side of the ship, (floating anchors are anchors which aren't put all the way down, but just enough to steady the sides of the ship), They then headed into the wind and rode the storm out for about two days. During the storm they shut the ship down, meaning they closed all the decks and "You stayed wherever you were until it was over," Mills said.

W.D. Mills was a baker on the ship. He said they were 24 hours on bake shop and 24 hours off. He advanced from having no rating at all up to third class baker, and said if he had stayed longer he would have been a first class baker.

"But," he said, "Aboard ship, all was teamwork. The

Navy did a good job of training you for just about any job on the ship. Each sailor could handle just about any assignment where he was needed."

They had a group of specially trained men to fight fires of which there were many on an aircraft carrier. They called them "Airedales", but everybody had their duty at fire station helping the Airedales. Mills told of one pilot who came in too high, and when he hooked the tail of his plane onto the tail hook line it slammed the front of the plane on the flight deck bursting both fuel tanks and sending a large stream of fuel down the deck which quickly caught fire. He said it hardly took two minutes for the Airedales to have it all cleaned up.

Their main job was to make sure the pilots were safe. These Airedale guys would go right into a burning plane and drag the pilot and other crewmen out to safety. Mills said they only lost one pilot. His plane slammed too hard into the deck and the cockpit caught fire. They got him out and sent him to Guam to a hospital, but they heard later he had died.

They were 19 months at sea. Their aircraft carrier stayed out at sea away from land, and thus were not in the middle of the fighting, but the planes from their deck were deeply involved. They aided in the taking of Iwo Jima and also in taking Okinawa, two of the key islands taken in the war, as well as many of the smaller islands near Japan.

They went to the Aleutian islands in the Bearing Strait for rest and recuperation, (R & R), not for the sailors, but for the pilots who were completely exhausted and wore out from their constant duty.

His ship was two days sailing off of Japan when the atomic bombs were dropped. He said, "If they hadn't dropped those bombs I wouldn't be alive today. The Japanese weren't any where near giving up at the time. It would have cost us many American lives if they hadn't dropped them." He said the Japanese worshiped their emperor and every Japanese soldier would have fought to their death if ordered to please the Emperor.

Coming back home there were seven aircraft carriers (all alike) which they took through the Panama Canal and up the east coast of the USA to Boston, Massachusetts where the ships were put in mothballs, which means they were taken out of active service, all the supplies removed, cleaned up and painted and a white power put on all the guns and artillery to preserve them. This powder resembled mothballs.

Much later these seven ships were sent to Korea as helicopter pads. Their decks weren't big enough for the more modern jet planes. They were eventually sold for scrap metal to Japan. Mills said, "So Japan got them anyhow!"

Six months after arriving at Boston Mills was discharged. He said, of the 900 crewmen on his ship only about 60 are

still living. They have a reunion every year.

W.D. Mills said he is proud of America's military.

**Salute**  
A Tribute to the Veterans

**Commercial State Bank**  
The Friendly West Texas Bank

505 N. Main Member FDIC 758-9595



*"Better than honor and glory,  
and History's iron pen,  
Was the thought of duty done  
and the love of his  
fellow-men."*

- Richard Watson Gilder



**West Texas Center  
Pivots & Pumps**

Hobbs Hwy. 758-2829



**Reinke**  
MORE RIGHT THAN RAIN

## Home: from page 3C

equipment. Often, recovered military and personal equipment artifacts are forwarded to the USAF Life Science Equipment Laboratory (LSEL) located at Brooks City-Base, in San Antonio for advanced scientific and historical analysis. Frequently, the LSEL is able to provide crucial case determinations (through analysis of recovered equipment artifacts) when other critical evidence (such as human remains: bones or teeth) are not recovered or available, and/or does not yield any substantial conclusions through DNA testing.

Finally there is closure. The recovery and identification process may take years to complete. In addition to factors previously mentioned, each separate line of evidence must be examined at the CIL and correlated with all historical evidence. All reports undergo a thorough peer review process which includes an external review by independent experts. Additionally, if mtDNA is part of the process, the search for family reference samples for mtDNA comparison can add a significant amount of time to the identification process. Completed cases are forwarded to the appropriate service Mortuary Affairs Office, whose members personally notify next-of-kin family members.

This whole process could be considered a gruesome task,

but it is vitally important to family members and loved ones to have some kind of knowledge of what happened to their loved one.

Congress recently passed legislation mandating the POW/MIA Accounting Community goal to increase its capability and capacity to insure at least 200 missing Americans are accounted for annually beginning the fiscal year 2015.

During this fiscal year JPAC will deploy approximately 90 investigation and recovery teams on 36 missions to 16 countries around the globe.

A case in point of the work of JPAC is the return of the remains of Staff Sergeant Jimmie Doyle, of Lamesa along with his fellow crew men of a B-24J Liberator heavy bomber which was shot down Sept. 1, 1944 while on a bombing mission of enemy targets near the town of Koror, Republic of Palau in the western Pacific Islands.

Crewmen on other aircraft reported seeing the plane come apart in the air and crash into the sea between Babelthuap and Koror islands. Two parachutes were spotted but none of the 11-man crew ever returned to friendly territory. An aerial search was unsuccessful, and more thorough recovery operations could not be conducted at the time due to Japanese control of the area.

Post war Japanese documents established that three members of the crew survived the crash but died while prisoners of the Japanese.

After approximately 68 years and six search efforts through the years, the men missing in action since WWII have been accounted-for and returned to their families for burial with full military honors.

In a more recent happening, JPAC team completed its investigation of aircraft wreckage in Alaska. Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Anchorage (June 26, 2012). A specialized team from Joint POW/MIA Account Command completed the investigation and recovery mission.

The Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) was featured on Fox News in December of 2010 with, Captain (now, Major) Jason Murray taking part in the interview.

It is comforting to know there is an organized, scientific effort being made to find and identify our lost military personnel.

Major Murray started out as a recovery team member, then for one year was a personal assistant to General Tom. He is currently the Operations Officer managing the 17 recovery teams. He was recently promoted to the rank of Major. He says he likes what he is doing.

*honor our heroes on*  
**VETERANS DAY** John 15:13

**First Presbyterian Church** 301 S.W. 3rd & Ave C  
758-3708

## Give Thanks for Your Freedom



Those who protect our right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness deserve our respect and admiration. We hope you'll join us in saluting their efforts on this important holiday!

**Farmers  
Insurance  
Agency**

100 SW 7th 758-9822