

SPECIAL EDITION

BRYCE CANYON UPDATE

USS BARTON INCIDENT REMEMBERED

BY DON BANKS

I wrote an article about the USS Barton (DD-722) that was published in the Bryce Canyon Update in April 1997. At that time I did not get specific with the details of working on the Barton. I received word a few weeks ago that Herman Dahm had died. He served with me in the outside repair crew of the 5th Division on the USS Bryce Canyon. I served on the Bryce Canyon and in that Division from January 1952 until June 1955. The Barton incident and the aftermath with the persons involved are so traumatic I feel that for Bryce Canyon history and for the general knowledge of people who were involved in this tragedy, their families and their shipmates should be more aware of the USS Barton incident. We were 18-19-20 year old kids when this happened, and have carried the memories for over 50 years. We are now in our 70s and it's time this be put on paper and it appears that I may be the one who should do this. I was moved to write this letter in Herman Dahm's memory because I knew he had a tough time with it. God bless him.

In this writing I will be discussing what I know, and what I observed. Some things may have been forgotten, others will never be forgotten. I've lived with them as if it had happened yesterday. Herman and I were together through this entire experience to the very end when we finally walked off the Barton and both knew we wouldn't have to go back again.

We had received word on the Bryce Canyon that the USS Barton DD-722 had struck a mine off the coast of Korea and was trying to

make it into port at Sasebo, Japan. They said the mine had exploded on the starboard side of the ship, at the front boiler room. They said five sailors were killed. The hatches to the boiler room had been sealed and the ship was trying to make it in, traveling 5-7 miles an hour. It took them five days before they got into port. We saw them coming in early that morning. We could not see that much of the hole on the starboard side of the ship. The ship was put directly into dry dock.

We were informed that we would have to be working on the boiler room equipment, pumps, etc. We would be taking them apart, drying them out and putting preservative on them.

We were later informed that the Japanese were setting up external bamboo scaffolding and that they would not go on the ship or think about doing any repairs whatsoever until the bodies of the sailors were removed. The division officer, I believe, was Lt. Cdr. Maupin; a Chief Petty Officer whom, I believe, was Chief Blair; Herman Dahm; myself and a couple other men from the outside repair crew (I believe one's name was Worrel) went over to the Barton to survey the situation and try to determine what we were going to have to do.

When we got on the Barton, we went to the port side where a watchman was stationed at the hatch. We opened the hatch and the ladder that normally goes down to the first landing had been torn loose at the bottom and was blown in an arched shape to the port side. We, however, were able to climb down the ladder. It bent down a little bit and allowed us to be able to stand on the small landing where the forced draft blowers for the boilers were located. It's a very small landing.

The repair officer, Chief, and Herman went down first. I followed. Just as I was stepping onto the landing, I heard Herman say, "Oh, my God." I turned on the landing and looked across the debris. Through the debris about 15-20 feet in front of us was a sailor hanging by the valves from the overhead. His head and neck were missing and his right leg was gone at the knee. There was a large piece of flesh hanging down over his chest. I guess it would normally have gone around his neck. He had on his right arm a very prominent tattoo of Popeye. There was no clothing on him except for a black web belt that he wore with his dungarees. Everything else was gone. Since he was hanging from the valves, just under the main deck, he was probably 30 or 40 feet from the bottom of the ship. The smell of death was absolutely unbelievable. Decomposition was well underway in the 5 days they had been at sea.

All of a sudden, directly behind me, pushing and screaming and trying to get to the debris, was another sailor from the Barton. We had a hard time containing him and trying to understand what was happening. He kept trying and trying to get to the debris where he saw the body. He finally said, "My God, listen to me. That's my buddy. That's my best friend. I have to try to help him." He pulled up his sleeve and showed us his Popeye tattoo. They had gotten their tattoos at the same time and the same place. They had been friends in high school, joined the Navy together, were assigned to

the same ship and were assigned to the boiler room. He said that his friend took his watch for him that night so he could go see the movie. (The sailor hanging from the valves died in his place that night.) The sailor on the platform then completely started to lose it. A corpsman came down as we held him. He was sedated and we lifted him out of the compartment.

We then again started to try to determine what action we could take to remove and get through the debris in the boiler room. What used to be three decks, grates, stairs, pipes, valves, etc., was now nothing more than a complete mangled mass of twisted steel. In some places it was impossible to even see through the debris. It was decided that we'd have to go in from the outside, through the hole where the blast hit. We would be working with a group of welders who would be cutting away the metal. And we'd be working with the corpsmen recovery team to attempt to get the bodies out so the rest of the operation could continue. I don't recall if the welders were from our ship. I think not. I believe the medics were a recovery team from some other location.

Everyone went to the scaffolding on the outside of the ship: the welders, the corpsmen and our crew and commenced to cut our way in. I remember it was 2:00 in the afternoon. The debris would be cut into manageable lengths so it could be carried through the hole and thrown into the dry-dock. This operation was particularly precarious because we had three decks of debris above us. Anything that was loose or looked to be loose was cut down; otherwise we concentrated on trying to get through it. The smell of death was absolutely unbelievable. To try to counteract this problem, we tried smoking cigarettes as much as we could. However, they started making our mouths raw and didn't really solve the problem. So we started to chew them and hold the tobacco in our mouth.

The first remains were found where the blast hit and it folded the whole hull back on some remains. The corpsmen started removing these remains. However, they could find only half a pillowcase of remains. In the remains, a corpsman saw something gold, pulled it out and it was a wedding ring. On the inside the name Emy or Emmy was engraved. I can't remember which one it was. We didn't find out until much later that night that that boy was a black sailor. I'm sure all the boys in there were killed in an instant. They never had a clue.

We continued working on up into the night, fighting the smoke from cutting the steel, the smell of death, and the smell of fuel oil. At one point someone got permission, somehow, to get some whiskey and bring it on the ship. We tried to drink some, found it didn't kill the odor and just made us more nauseous. We did, however, find that it did help a little if you would just take a mouthful and hold it in your mouth while you were working.

We finally reached a second body that was lying between the two boilers. The corpsman came with a litter. I reached down, took hold of the sailor's left arm, tried to pull him out from under some hanging debris. All of a sudden, I pulled his left arm and part of his rib cage off. I can remember freezing in my tracks and not having a clue. I think it was the shock. The corpsman then came over, took the arm out of my hands and placed it on the litter. Then we loaded the rest of the remains onto the litter and it was removed. We again continued cutting and removing debris, stabilizing debris, making sure it would not fall, etc. We were working in two different teams trying to get through the debris and also trying to get around the boilers.

I remember sometime during the night, one of the officers in charge asked if we wanted to give it up for the night and come back later. As I recall, most everyone in there did not want to have to come back and face these situations later. We're here, we're sick, we're tired, our emotions shot. However, there were still three sailors in there that we had to get to. If this situation was in reverse, I knew they'd do

that for us. To stay would be the last and decent thing we could do for them and their families. I thought about those boys and their loved ones all night long. We were a hurting bunch mentally and physically, but we were alive and we decided, "Let's get it done. We'll be here until these boys have all been removed."

We continued working on the debris. Since we were in two groups, one group continued to move forward to where they could get up to the sailor who had been hanging on the valves. The other group tried to remove debris so we could somehow get behind the boilers. We found two sailors. The one in the valves was the third sailor. As hard as we searched, looking through the debris, we could not find the other two and it was decided they must be beside or behind the boilers. So we started cutting debris from around those areas. It was sometime in the morning when a corpsman came to me and said they were able to get the boy down and out of the valves. I believe Herman was working with them, getting the sailor down from the valves and out of there. We continued removing debris from the site of the boilers and about 6:00 or 6:30 AM the corpsmen were able to get to the bodies of the two sailors, one behind each boiler. Both these bodies were completely intact. The concussion and debris evidently killed them. Someone mentioned that our ship had sent a boat over to pick us up.

It was about 8:00 in the morning. We had been in there 18 hours. As we waited for the boat at the dry dock, we all went down on the cold concrete. I remember laying down face first and the cold of the concrete felt so good and I could finally breathe some air that was fresh. Of course I couldn't get rid of that smell that I had been working in all night. For some reason, out of nowhere, I realized I was crying my heart out. I was having the come-aparts. I turned

and looked at the other guys and I realized I was not alone. I guess it was just mental, psychological, emotional overload.

When we got back to the Bryce Canyon, we peeled off our clothes, showered, showered and showered, but we still could not get rid of that odor. Although we were dead tired, we couldn't really sleep. It was impossible. We started to get something to eat at the galley. However, the smell of food, for some reason, just made us terribly nauseous. We talked the cooks out of a box of crackers, went back to the shop, sat and ate crackers and drank water. Eating, for Herman and I was probably one of the hardest things we could do again. We had talked amongst ourselves and decided not to discuss what we'd been through. We didn't discuss that much of it even with other people on the ship. It was just too hard to go through.

We finally got to where we could go to the galley and attempt to eat, but after a few bites, somehow we would recall that smell, get up, dump the rest of the food, go back to the shop and eat crackers. We finally decided if we didn't sit with or near each other, maybe it would be better. So we would sit in different places with our back to each other. I would eat as much as I possibly could, but I would have to get up with my tray and as I turned around I would see that Herman was already dumping his. It was some time before we could actually sit down and eat a complete meal.

I think we had a day off before we went back onto the ship to help start preserving the equipment. I know I was amazed that all the rest of the debris had been cleared out and the Japanese were now working on their part of the ship. We were on and off for about a week getting everything done. The Japanese patched and reinforced the outside. We got all the fire room equipment cleaned and dried and preserved. The fire room was then sealed and the

ship sailed back to the U.S. using one boiler room.

All the psychological consequences of that night we had to try to work through, each in our own way. There were no trauma teams for psychological help. You just had to do the best you could—try to make sense and get on with your life. However, I know in my case and probably Herman's, we had flash-backs, nightmares and other mental traumas we had to deal with. Some of the memories always stay with you. The odor, the man hanging in the valves, the Emmy ring and the boy whose left arm I pulled off, I can see them as if it happened yesterday and it's been fifty years. For many years, if I would try to drink whiskey, and especially, if I held it in my mouth, the muscles in my left arm would tighten up so tight I absolutely could not stand the pain. This was evidently a psychological association between the whiskey and the sailor who I pulled out. However, later in life, not being able to drink liquor may have been a blessing to me. I couldn't just sit down, get drunk and act like this experience never happened. My best therapy was keeping my mind and body active in many things and many ways. In civilian life, people had no idea why I had to get out of bed in the middle of the night, sit for a while and then go back to bed. There are many times when you need to be by yourself. There's times when you need to be real busy and sometimes by yourself. You are trying to handle flash-backs and memories. I have no doubts in my mind that Herman Dahm, for the rest of his life, was going through many of the same things.

As I have said, Herman and I never talked about the Barton again. When I was discharged, I spent some time with Herman in Montana and we made a point not to discuss the Barton. We had a good time and stayed busy.

After we had finished up on the Barton, the division officer (as I've said before was Maupin) came down to the outside repair shop and said, "I have written up commendations for you boys and I am taking them up to

the Captain. Not only did you do one hell of a job, you did it in 18 hours. I know what you did. I know what you went through."

It wasn't long before Maupin was back in the shop. He said he'd talked to the Captain and the Captain said, "In war people live, people die. The living take care of the dead. End of conversation. Request for commendations denied." I cannot remember who the Captain was at this point.

I hope this letter will help someone, somewhere understand something about what happened in the tragedy of the Barton.

Respectfully,
Don Banks

We would like to thank Mr. Banks for allowing his story to be told in our special edition newsletter. He and all the men involved in the removal of bodies and debris are to be commended. We hope his story will be a help to others who have lived the nightmares of war and are looking for a way to find peace. Maybe telling the story will help.

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