

## **Dispatch from the U.S.S. *Herndon***

*By Barbara Glakas*

The Town of Herndon was named after Commander William Lewis Herndon, a brave Navy officer who died in 1857 when his ship sank in the Atlantic Ocean at the hands of a devastating hurricane.

By 1860 the U.S. Naval Academy had erected a twenty-one-foot obelisk in Herndon's honor on the Annapolis grounds, known as the Herndon Monument. The town of Herndon's veteran's memorial on the town green is a smaller sized replica of the Herndon Monument.

The Navy also honored Commander Herndon by naming two ships after him. The first ship named the U.S.S. *Herndon* was a Clemson-class destroyer (DD-198) which was launched in 1919. The ship served in reserve training exercises and later served in the U.S. Coast Guard. Next, she was transferred to the Royal Navy, and later still she served in the Soviet Navy. She was sunk in action in 1944 in the Barents Sea.

The second ship named the U.S.S. *Herndon* was a Gleaves-class destroyer (DD-638). This ship was launched in 1942 by the Norfolk Navy Yard. During the Normandy invasion the Americans were assigned to the Omaha and Utah beaches. The Bay of Seine is the body of water that abuts those beaches. The plan of assault for D-Day called for the destroyers to come in close to the beach via the Bay of Seine to provide fire support, flanking and protecting the small landing craft that carried the troops.

The U.S.S. *Herndon* was not only part of this joint task force of screening carriers, but it was selected to lead the destroyer division. Its sister ships gave her a 1 in 10 chance of surviving this Allied invasion. Before the invasion, sailors aboard the *Herndon* were told by their commander to write letters home and to "make it a good one," as it was likely to be their last letter home. Ultimately, the *Herndon* miraculously survived the invasion and was dubbed "The Lucky Herndon."

One sailor, Joseph Reese, served in the engine room aboard the *Herndon* during the D-Day invasion on June 6, 1944. Also aboard was a war correspondent named Tom Wolf. Joseph Reese's son donated a copy of a dispatch to the Herndon Historical Society, written by Tom Wolf while he was aboard the *Herndon* on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1944, three days into the initiation of the Allied invasion of Normandy.

Mr. Wolf's dispatch is reproduced in full below.

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Copy of Dispatch Written by Tom WOLF, NEA War Correspondent.

Aboard the U.S.S. HERNDON, Thursday 9 June 1944.

### THE GERMANS HERE ARE BEGINNING TO FIGHT BACK.

When you're in the battle, you don't get a very broad picture of the battle. We don't know how the army is doing. We only know what is happening in our area – naval fire support area – and most of the time we only know what's happening in a small part of that. But things are getting rough.

No one aboard the HERNDON has had much sleep for the past four days. Few people have had as much as two hours in the past 24.

It started about midnight last night. A few German planes swung in over the area, dropping glider bombs and sowing mines. Since the first time since H hour there was bitching aboard ship about the air cover. It was a clear night, but our fighter protection was nowhere to be seen. The Germans had things pretty much their own way.

It's hard to tell exactly what did happen during the night. If you could believe the scuttlebutt, things were pretty awful. Fortunately, few people do believe it. Whatever else may have happened, I'm sure of two things. They were bad enough: (1) One bomb dropped suddenly out of nowhere and hit the water much too close for comfort; (2) A destroyer near us got hit by a mine or torpedo.

We took the wounded off her. Our wardroom became an overcrowded surgery for two or three hours until a hospital ship came along side to get the wounded. Our doctor, Lt. (j) John McC. PECK, Cortland, N.Y., had – by working incredible speed – managed to get everyone patched up sufficiently for the transfer.

All in all it was a very nerve-wracking night. Then, around noon today, we started firing again. The officers and men were sleepy to the point of exhaustion.

Our target was a gun emplacement which enemy troops were using as a strong point.

On board ship you've got to decide whether you're going to see the action or hear it. You can't do both. I decided to hear it in the combat information room. This room has no portholes for visual observation, but it has just about every kind of radio equipment in the world.

The story of the battle as I heard it is the story of perfect Army-Navy cooperation. The Army fire-control party on shore told us where they wanted the fire and we cocked it in there:

ARMY: "Position XXX is giving us lots of trouble and we want to take it. Can you give is one minute of rapid fire?"

NAVY: "Roger." (Our five-inch guns open with salvos every ten seconds).

ARMY: "Keep it up. That's the most beautiful firing I ever saw."

Hearing between the words of the army observer's voice, we sense the appreciation of a man whose life we are saving. A warm flow of blood surges through our veins, mingling pride and pleasure. Our ship and her crew are doing their job perfectly. Ensign Harold C. CARLSTEAD, Chicago, puts into words what each of these exhausted, sleepless men feels: "This is better than sleeping."

NAVY: "We see bursts on the shore. Are we endangering our own troops?"

ARMY: "No. No. We are moving up. We've got them on the run. Raise your fire 100 and give us another minute of rapid fire."

NAVY: "We've got to slow up our fire."

ARMY: "Can you give us 15 second intervals? Now that we've got you zeroed in there, we'd hate to lose you. We've absolutely got to have you."

NAVY: "Okay, We're resuming fire at 15-second intervals."

ARMY: "Good boy! Good boy! Go to it!"

NAVY: "Is our fire effective?"

ARMY: "It certainly is!"

There is a short pause.

NAVY: "We've got to slow down to 30-second intervals."

ARMY: "Slow it down but you've got to keep firing. You haven't wasted a shot."

The speaker is so winded he can hardly talk. We know that our troops must be moving up fast. After about an hour of shooting there is a pause.

NAVY: "How are you making out?"

ARMY: "It's plenty damn warm but we are making out fine, thanks to you. Hold on a minute. We may need you again."

Over other radio circuits we can hear other navy and army fire parties talking back and forth – the army calling for the fire and the navy obliging.

Suddenly one of the ear-phoned men in the control room repeats a message from out outlooks: "Splash at 045 degrees relative, 600 yards." We evidently are bothering the Germans badly. The splash means that shore batteries are opening up on us. The men know that this counter-

battery fire means they are doing their job to perfection. But that gives small comfort when you're two miles from shore – and anchored.

The talked keeps reporting the splashes, coming closer and closer. Our guns keep answering back. Finally, our ammunition is almost gone. The forward guns are so hot that the paint has been entirely blistered off them. Men are hosing them down to cool them off sufficiently so that shells won't explode the moment they enter the breach. It's time for us to pull away.

Before we move back we flash the coordinates of our target to the two destroyers which move up to replace us.

Our officers and men are justifiably proud of the U.S.S. *HERNDON*. It gives them a special kick that when "Old Queenie" leaves, two ships move in to replace us.

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*About this column: "Remembering Herndon's History" is a regular Herndon Patch feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon's past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of "Remembering Herndon's History" columns is available on the Historical Society website at [www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org).*

*The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society's website at [www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org), and the Historical Society's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory> for more information.*

*Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact [HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com](mailto:HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com).*