

Virginians at War

USS *Birmingham*

Transcript

NARRATOR: Virginians have always stood at the crossroads of the fight for freedom. It is a battle in which we all reap the benefits.

WORLD WAR II 1939-1945

NARRATOR: World War II was the defining event of the 20th Century. It involved 60 countries. Over 57 million people were killed. The nuclear age was launched, and the United States emerged as the world's most powerful nation.

World War II was fought in two major theaters of operation: the North African, Mid-Eastern, and European Theater, and to the Far East, the Asiatic-Pacific theater. During World War II, thousands of ships were built for the war effort. Some of the most famous were built in the state of Virginia. This is the story of one of them.

USS *BIRMINGHAM* CL-62

WALTON: I first saw it in 1943, and I was amazed because I was 17 and right out of boot camp, and I loved the ship. Love at first sight, you know? It was a beautiful ship.

VANWORMER: I was just amazed. I just couldn't fathom something being this huge out in the water, you know, and being able to not sink.

GREENWOOD: It was in Newport News Shipbuilding Dry Dock Company, being fitted out. So, after the ship was commissioned, that is, it was finished, and the crew was on board. Most of our crew were raw recruits right out of Great Lakes.

REES: We took off from Newport News and out into the Atlantic to take a convoy over to Africa, and I guess I was just kind of overwhelmed.

SICILY: FIRST ACTION, 1943

MAROCCHI: And then we were sent over to the Mediterranean, to support the landings in Sicily, was our first combat action. We were bombarding positions on the shore.

DOUGLAS: We got a message and Patton's Armored Forces had outrun their supply train, so the *Birmingham* put two or three whaleboats over the side with 2,000 Spam sandwiches.

NEWBY: Bougainville was the next big island that we had to take in this stepping stone effect that we had, that we were gonna use to go to Japan.

BOUGAINVILLE: IN HARM'S WAY, 1943

NEWBY: I saw a formation of planes. General Quarters went,

General Quarters, General Quarters, All hands man your battle stations.

NEWBY: It wasn't long until we are belly-deep in Jap' planes.

MAROCCHI: We could hear the five inch guns firing. And then the 40mm's started and we knew something was getting close. And I heard through the headphone, I heard Sam yell, "Here comes a fish!" We looked at each other and waited. Nobody broke, nobody panicked, nothing, just waited. And suddenly there was a *boom*, and the whole ship shuttered. We looked around at the bulkheads, and no water coming in. We thought, well, maybe we're alright. About five minutes later, *boom*, another torpedo hit. This one was aft, just below the hangar deck. Well, out of that we probably lost 20 people.

ROACH: When we took that aerial torpedo, it knocked the electric out, right in there. We flipped on them battle lamps, you know. We had a gunner's mate, and he says, "Oh." He says, "I think we're sinking." Scared me to death and all the rest of them in there too. No lights, no air in there.

MAROCCHI: The ship could still steam, still shoot, and we were able to stay in the battle.

GREENWOOD: Those two torpedoes, the guardian angels arranged for them to go through that ship in the only two places you could put a torpedo in a *Cleveland*-class cruiser and not blow it up.

YOUNG: We were amused later on, to hear Tokyo Rose announced that they had sunk the *Birmingham*.

LEYTE GULF: THE *PRINCETON* INCIDENT, 1944

SMITH: It was a cloudy day. Some plane came out of one of those clouds, and dropped a bomb onto *Princeton*. We were told after that to drop back, and take care of the *Princeton*. See if you can put the fire out and get underway again.

REES: I got topside and looked over at the *Princeton*, and it was burning real good. I could see the half end there was just, looked like it was kind of red hot. So I sit down underneath the number three turret. I thought, wouldn't it be a hell of a thing if that boat would blow up? And the next thing I knew, I was on my face on the deck. For the next seven and a half months, I didn't stand up. I thought I was the only guy that survived, back there in that afterdeck. I find out that there was one other fella that survived from back there. In his article, he said that there were 300 of them back there and he only saw one living person. It was me. I thought I was all alone. But I survived.

MAROCCHI: We had one medical officer at the time. He said, "I looked at you that first day, John. I said, he's not gonna make it, so I'll leave him alone and try to save

the people that I can save." And he said, he came back about 24 hours later, looked again, he said, "Son of a gun, he's still alive! Maybe we can save him."

YOUNG: Well, I was very lucky. I was up there watching the action as they were coming in, and for some reason, I don't know why, I said, "I think I'll go down below." Because we were not at General Quarters. In fact, a lot of the people up there were sight-seers. So, I went down the ladder and I was not down there more than a minute or two 'til they exploded. And there were bodies, and pieces of bodies, all over, and blood running in the gutters. It was horrible.

AFDAHL: When the explosion, the outburst from the explosion come, I was standing, looking right straight at it along with another fella. Of course, you can see it but you don't have time to do anything. All that thrashing water hit me in the face, and I thought I had been blinded. I got to checking around, and see what was wrong, had a sore mouth and a sore finger and a few things... I'd taken a piece of shrapnel in my face, right about here. Shattered one tooth and one on my finger down here, plus numerous others. But when I looked up, pulled the curtain back, seemed like I was half out of it, it was probably, it was two or three minutes, what I saw was... I said, "There's nothing wrong with me." I said that to myself, or I may have said it out loud. So I got up and got out of there. I said, I didn't need to be in here wasting no time, because it was terrible.

WALTON: When that exploded, it knocked me down, and I jumped up and I ran under the six-inch guns, because stuff was still falling. But all of a sudden, it started hurting, and I lost all control of my arm. We went... it took us four days to get to a hospital ship, and I was on there four days. And the doctor kept saying, "Did they x-ray you yet?" And I said, "No, sir." The fourth day, he says, "You, come with me." He took me up to the x-ray. He developed the x-ray, took me in the operating room. When I woke up, this was tied around my neck with a piece of gauze. A spark plug. It weighs a quarter of a pound and it's pretty close to three and a half inches long. So, put me in a hospital for nine months. The man on my right, his name was Staymates, he got killed. And the guy on my left, I asked about him. Well, he got a black eye. And I got the spark plug.

WILSON: The whole side of the ship was like, you take a shotgun and, at close range, hit a target. I mean, that whole side of the ship... big holes, little holes, everything. Everybody on the ship, on that side of the ship, were immediately killed or injured. It was just like rain, only, it was red-hot metal. It just fell. It was shot in the air and just fell all over the ship. And the only thing I could think of was going over the side, because I thought I was injured that bad and in my mind, as far as I was concerned, I wanted to be buried at sea. So I tried to crawl across the deck, and the metal – big pieces, little pieces – were just, it was red hot. But I knew I had to get under cover. So I crawled over, under the cover there. My hands were all burnt, and everything, from, you know, the red-hot metal. But I crawled over, under there, and then I guess I passed out.

WIRKUS: If I wouldn't have been called up, I got called up because that one gun wasn't working, I wouldn't have been up on topside. I would have been downstairs by my bunk. But, well... duty calls, you go.

BERGSTROM: The dead were stacked up in corners, out of the way, and as I recall, 9:30, 10:00 at night, it was time to commit those dead to the deep. And, they went down to the lunch room and got about 20 lunch tables with collapsible legs. They laid them open spaced on the deck, not too far from the life lines, just about [this] much space between each one. They sent out a working party to bring up a body, put on the table. And then, when they got one on each table with a mattress cover over them, the Chaplain would raise his hand, say a short prayer, and then at each end four able-bodied men, two on each side of the table, would reach down, pick it up, and go sideways to the rail and raise one end up. And a body would slide off into the deep. Did that for 220-some that night.

PERKINS: Well, I think the first thing was when I got notice he'd been wounded, and then got checking around, and got checking with some of the other wives, you know? And that's the way I found out. That was the incident, and Perk said he was on the quarterdeck. He and a couple of guys was watching somebody else, what they were doing, and those two guys were just... were blown to pieces. And he wondered all his life why he was saved.

OKINAWA: KAMIKAZE, 1945

RYAN: Okinawa was the next operation, and this, we're now talking about April of '45. That was, in many respects, one of the toughest campaigns for the Navy. We lost more people in that operation than any other because of the kamikazes.

VANWORMER: We were standing out on the deck and I heard a plane, and I looked up and here he was, right smack above us coming down. Hit right in front of the bridge and went right down through the officer's quarters and through the sick bay, and killed everybody. And the bomb went down to the armor deck and blew out the side of the ship, and that's how it got flooded so bad.

HODGES: That's when I looked up and saw the suicide plan. It was just straight down. He went for the bridge and missed the bridge by about five feet, hit the main deck on the starboard side. We lost 49 men that day, and four were missing and 89 were wounded. There was a Marine, and he was on a 20mm gun, and he was shooting, and he was knocking chunks out of the wing of that plane, big as daylight. It was just scattered holes at him.

YOUNG: So I ran down the passageway, pulled the water-tight door shut behind me. Well, the plane hit just a few feet the other side of that door. I couldn't see it, of course, but it came straight down. And about 50, 50-some were killed and most of them were in sick bay.

MCCANN: I was coming from the mess hall for some reason, but I don't remember why, and I was headed for my bunk, which is in the 1st Division. And that's where the bomb went off, in the 1st Division. So I thank the dear Lord many a times that I didn't make it to my bunk, because I wouldn't be here today.

RYAN: And our whole area was engulfed in flame, and my instinctive reaction took over, and I dashed out of there, through the burning part of the ship. My roommate didn't get out, and that haunts me to this day.

VANWORMER: We buried 27 out at sea on the way to Guam. You know how they do that, they slip 'em off, and the taps...

GOODMAN: You know, that's when the real reality hit me, then. You know, 'cause I didn't wanna go back up. I was very apprehensive. And you know, shucks, I'm only on this thing for a short period of time and I can imagine what these guys who have been on that thing since it was commissioned, and, you know, what they've been through. And then go on back out, and getting smacked again.

THE "MIGHTY B"

HODGES: The ship was commissioned in '43. It was hit in '43, '44 and '45, and decommissioned in '46. And... quite a gallant ship. Almost unlucky, but then again, it was a great ship. And I have a lot of old memories on that ship.

RYAN: There were wonderful people, and they were very exciting, dramatic things to live through but being part of that enormous fleet, I knew it never would... there'd never be a fleet like that again in history. So, I felt that I was a part of history and I'm damn glad that I survived it.

ROACH: I made it. A lot of them didn't... it was rough.

YOUNG: We helped save our liberty, preserve our liberty. I still think it's the best thing I've ever done in my life.

Battle Stars

Pacific Raids: Tarawa and Wake Island

Empress Augusta Bay

The Mariannas: Capture of Saipan and Guam

Capture of Tinian

Raids on Western Caroline Islands, Okinawa, Northern Luzon, Formosa

Capture of Iwo Jima

Okinawa Bunto Operation

Naval Unit Commendation

"Our steel ships, too, are served by iron men."

Thos. B. Inglis

Captain USS Birmingham

1943-1944

Wartime Complement - 1200 men

Wartime Casualties - 796 men

Displacement - 10,000 tons

Length - 610 feet

Speed - 33 knots

Engines - 4 turbines, 100,000 hp

Twelve - 6 inch guns

Twelve - 5 inch guns

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