

March 1945 – World War II at 80 (Part 2)



The firebombing of Tokyo in March 1945 devastated the city, causing the death of up to 100,000 Japanese citizens. (Library of Congress / Public Domain photo)

Firebombs on Tokyo, progress in the Philippines, survival of the USS Franklin

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TOKYO, Japan — In the Pacific theater, the month of March saw wide-scale death and destruction to the city of Tokyo.

During the evenings of March 9-10, formations of 334 U.S. B-29 Super Fortress bombers flew from the Mariana Islands to Tokyo and dropped 1,665 tons of incendiary cluster bombs over the city.

The shells contained napalm, a jelly-like petroleum that burned with intense heat and spread quickly.

The aerial attack was code-named *Operation Meetinghouse*.

The bombs produced an inferno that consumed 16 square miles of the city and caused the deaths of up to 100,000 Japanese citizens.

The operation became the most destructive aerial bombing campaign in history.

Bridgeport, Ind., native George Gladden, witnessed the fiery spectacle from one of the B-29 bombers in the raid.

A radio operator assigned to the 20th Air Force, Gladden and his crew had been making conventional bomb runs over Tokyo since November 1944.

On March 9-10, the 20th Air Force, now aided with the protection of P-51 fighters taking off from Iwo Jima’s airfields, switched to low elevation bombing with napalm.

“As far as you can see, the whole town was on fire,” Gladden recalled in an interview.

Gladden returned home after 35 missions and lived a long life as a famer in Clayton, dying at the age of 94 in 2017.



GLADDEN

Luzon, Philippines: Herbert Weaver

The war raged on in Luzon as Allied Forces moved north to catch the retreating Japanese.

Paragon High School graduate Herbert Weaver was numbered among the American forces there.

Weaver was a technical sergeant in the Army’s 38th Division, 152nd Infantry Regiment in the Luzon campaign.

He was a likeable guy who cared for those serving under him.

A Feb. 2, 1945, article in Martinsville’s *Daily Reporter* shared that Weaver and some other sergeants arranged a 1944 Christmas Day “gift” to the privates in their unit.

The sergeants offered to perform the K.P. duty normally done by the privates.

The article stated, “The privates were happy at being relieved of kitchen duty, and the sergeants were happy, too, for they got more than their share of turkey and trimmings.”

Perhaps it was his kind disposition that also got the attention of famous war correspondent Ernie Pyle.

According to a July 11, 1944, article in the *Daily Reporter*, both Pyle and Weaver were on the island of Oahu earlier in 1944.

Pyle suggested to battalion leaders that Weaver be awarded the Expert Infantryman’s Badge.

The suggestion worked, and he received the honor on July 1, 1944.

Although an infantryman, on March 11, 1945, Weaver and several others from his unit boarded a cargo plane to drop supplies to their battalion fighting in the mountains of Luzon.

Weaver went on the flight to help direct the pilot to the locations of the patrol units needing the supplies.

The plane, flying low to spot the units on the ground, failed to clear the peak of a mountain and crashed into it.

Weaver and the others on board died in the mishap.

Weaver was later buried in the Manila American Cemetery, where his body remains today.

Cebu, Philippines: Emmett Davis

Meanwhile, 356 miles south of Manila, Allied forces invaded the southern Philippine Island of Cebu on March 26 where, after four weeks of combat, they defeated the Japanese stronghold.

Emmett Davis, from Oolitic in Lawrence County, was serving there as a battery clerk with the 221st Field Artillery Battalion, part of the Americal (23rd Infantry) Division.

Some 5,000 men landed on enemy



B-29 Super Fortress bombers drop firebombs on Japan in 1945 (National Museum of the Air Force / Public Domain photo)



A 155mm howitzer belonging to the 221st Field Artillery fires at a pillbox 1,200 yards away (Combined Arms Research Library / Public Domain photo)

mine-laden Talisay Beach and proceeded to Cebu City where enemy forces engaged them.

Davis’s 221st Field Artillery Battalion pummeled the Japanese units holding out in the heavily entrenched hills north of the city.

The fighting, during which U.S. forces destroyed 85 enemy pillboxes, lasted into June before the combat operations concluded.

Davis moved to Martinsville after the war and served as a postal carrier for 38 years.

He was a former commander of the American Legion Post in Martinsville.

He died in 2007 at the age of 81.



DAVIS

USS Franklin: Floyd ‘Bud’ Smith

One of the most dramatic and heroic events of the Pacific campaign took place on March 19, 1945, on board the aircraft carrier *USS Franklin*, named for Benjamin Franklin.

Nicknamed “Big Ben,” she was commissioned in January 1944.

Gunners Mate 3rd Class Floyd E. “Bud” Smith was one of her maiden crewmen.

Smith, a Martinsville native, graduated from high school in 1942.

On March 18, 1945, the *Franklin* was 60 miles off the coast of Japan launching her dive-bombers, which pummeled the coastal islands.

Smith had spent all day and night loading bombs onto the Hellcat torpedo bombers.

On the morning of March 19, a Japanese dive-bomber snuck through the anti-aircraft defenses and released two 500-pound bombs, which struck the *Franklin*.



SMITH



The attack on the USS Franklin in March 1945 causes her to list heavily to one side as another ship pulls alongside to extract the crew. (National Archives / Public Domain photo)

The explosions from the bombs’ impact set ablaze the bombs in the carrier’s hold and ignited the 200,000 gallons of aviation fuel needed for her dive bombers.

A blazing fire engulfed the ship and planes on her deck, searing her frame and nearly sinking her.

Smith escaped death that morning by choosing to sleep in rather than go to the galley for breakfast with his friends.

Everyone in the galley died in the explosion.

Roused by the thunderous impact which rocked his ship, Smith hurried up to the deck to his assigned gun, now obscured by heavy smoke, and spent the next 48 hours defending the lame duck ship from further attacks.

Later that day, the gunners on *Franklin* shot down a Japanese bomber that came to sink her.

The attack caused the deaths of 807 of the 2,600 officers and enlisted crew on board.

The *USS Santa Fe* pulled up to the side of the burning *Franklin* and took on sailors wishing to evacuate the ship.

Smith, along with 700 other men, decided to stay on their ship and continue their efforts to save her.

The damage to the *Franklin* was so ex-

tensive that Admiral Davison recommended that the crew abandon and scuttle the ship.

Capt. Leslie Gehres, the ship’s skipper, refused to do so.

Instead, he called on the surviving crew of 704 men to save their ship.

Miraculously, the men successfully doused the fires, patched the gaping holes, and nursed the wounded ship 12,000 miles back to the Brooklyn Naval Yards in New York City.

Smith married Delores Grant from Brooklyn, N.Y., in August 1945. He was discharged two months later.

He and his wife lived in Brooklyn, N.Y., where he served for over 30 years as a superintendent for apartment buildings before returning to Indiana.

Smith died in 2009 at the age of 86.

Although the *Franklin* had the highest number of deaths for any surviving U.S. warship, the perseverance of Smith and the crew of the *Franklin* testified to the unbreakable spirit of U.S. forces.

Next time: April 1945

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