

# **TIN CAN SAILORS SAVE THE DAY!**

The USS *Johnston*  
and the Battle off Samar

Kevin McDonald

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ASHLAND, OREGON

# TIN CAN SAILORS SAVE THE DAY!

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*This book is dedicated to all the men of Taffy Three.  
The courage and skill they demonstrated off Samar will  
long be remembered as the U.S. Navy's finest hour.*



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## CHAPTER 1

# Prelude

**W**E CAN'T GO DOWN WITH OUR FISH STILL ABOARD," said Captain Evans. "Stand by for torpedo attack."

A column of six Japanese heavy cruisers sped by on the right. Each cruiser was five times the size of Evan's ship, the destroyer USS *Johnston*. Flashes flickered from enemy guns as they fired on the *Johnston*. Some shells whistled overhead, while others crashed into the waves in front of the *Johnston*. The enemy rounds fell like rain.

Captain Evans was determined to strike back hard, and torpedoes were the *Johnston's* most powerful weapon. He chose the lead enemy ship as the target. Sailors on the torpedo mounts set the torpedoes to run at twenty-seven knots and plotted in a one-degree spread.

Evans shouted, "Fire torpedoes!"

A sailor pulled the firing lever. The first torpedo blasted out the tube, flew over the men on the rail and plunged into the water. Every three seconds another lever was pulled, launching all of the torpedoes into the deep blue sea. Ten white wakes fanned out toward the enemy cruisers.

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“Fish in the water!” a sailor yelled.

On the bridge of the *Johnston* officers and sailors watched the Japanese cruiser. It disappeared into smoke and clouds off the Philippine island of Samar. One officer strained to see through the haze while another counted off the seconds to impact.

Through a gap in the clouds a geyser of water erupted beside the enemy ship. The sound of the explosion rippled across the ocean. A moment later the cruiser emerged from the haze with flames leaping from the deck. A twenty-foot section had been blown off the front of the ship.

The men on deck of the *Johnston* yelled, “Hooray!”

Their celebration was short lived. Japanese shells that had been falling around the *Johnston* finally found their mark. Three 14-inch battleship rounds pierced the thin deck armor, crushing the number two engine and knocking out all power to the rudder. The whole ship seemed to surge out of the water for a moment.

In the next moment two 6-inch rounds crashed into the *Johnston's* bridge, splintering the steel walls and cutting holes in machinery and men.

Blood poured off the bridge like water. One officer lay on the floor complaining about pain in his arms, not seeming to realize his left leg was gone below the knee. Another man was missing his head. The blast blew off two of Captain Evan's fingers.

When the ship's doctor rushed toward him, the captain waved him off. “Don't bother me now. Help some of those guys that are hurt.” His shirt singed and hanging in tatters,





“Fish in the water!” Note that the photo shows a quad torpedo mount (four tubes), while each mount on the *Johnston* was a quintuple mount (five tubes)

Captain Evans wrapped a handkerchief around his bloody hand. Lieutenant Hagen called his guns, wondering if they would all answer. Gun number four didn’t respond.

On the fantail, the rear of the ship, sailors opened a hatch and climbed down a ladder into the steering room. Seaman first class Dusty Rhodes grabbed a three-foot steel arm off the wall and fit the socket end over a shaft leading to the rudder. By turning the steel arm, Dusty and another sailor turned the rudder. With the electric motor down, they would have to steer the ship with muscle power.

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Shell splashes spouted like geysers beside the ship. Smoke and steam poured up from the engine room through three gaping holes in the deck. Sailors crawled up ladders and stretched out their arms for help. Men on deck pulled their wounded shipmates out of the inferno and carried them to sickbay.

Hagen wanted to get the guns firing again, and so he called out the target. Soon, flashes burst from the 5-inch guns, followed by an echo of booms. For a moment the ship rolled sideways under the force of the blasts. In truth, the battle was just beginning.