

Veteran Lionel Capoldo

WWII Sailor Helped in Normandy, Iwo Jima, Okinawa Invasions and Took Kamikaze Hit

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STONE

Seaman 1st Class Lionel Capoldo manned his post aboard mid-sized boats that supported troop landings during the first day, the first hour, the first minute and on, of the Omaha Beach, Iwo Jima and Okinawa invasions.

Entering these melees, Capoldo's superiors told him and the other sailors to expect the worst — up to 95 percent casualties at Omaha, for example.

But participating in the launches of these iconic World War II battles didn't present the then teen with what he remembers as a true sense of fear — no, that came only once, on April 16, 1945, as his Land Craft Support vessel (LCS 51), LCS 116 and the destroyer USS Laffey picketed the waters around Okinawa, two-plus weeks after the initial landings there.

"I see the plane," Capoldo, now 90 and living in Lake City, said of the kamikaze barreling toward his ship, "and I hear the explosion, feel the explosion. I thought, 'Oh boy.' And I'll tell ya, of all my time in the Navy, that was the only time I was truly a-scared."

Two days before, on April 14, the three ships sailed for their first day of radar picket duty around Okinawa — a particularly dangerous job by 1945 because of Japan's constant kamikaze threat but a necessary one that warned of advancing aircraft.

Eleven enemy planes flew toward the three ships that day, but all were shot down by U.S. planes before entering firing range of the Laffey, according to "World War II" magazine.

No threats came the next day. But on the morning of April 16, too many radar pips to count — what turned out to be 165 kamikaze planes and 150 others — headed toward the forces

around Okinawa, the magazine said. From that wave, 22 went straight for the Laffey, laying on a bloody 80 minutes of constant attack that left her with six direct kamikaze hits, four other hits from bombs, 32 dead sailors and 71 wounded.

A U.S. Vought F4U Corsair even knocked off a radar antenna while chasing a Japanese Nakajima Ki-43 as part of the air support that arrived shortly after the first attacks.

"When he pulled up, he didn't pull up soon enough," Capoldo said of the Corsair.

But the Laffey stayed afloat through it all and was able to be towed to a nearby island, eventually making it back to Seattle by May 25 and shown to the public to help sell war bonds. The Laffey's survival earned her a nickname: "The ship that would not die."

"Pouring water into a hole was all we were doing. There was a gaping hole in the deck where we were flooding it with water."

As for the support craft, the attacks claimed 17 of LCS 116's crew and wounded 12 others, but LCS 51 found herself by far the most fortunate: only three of the crew of about 70 were wounded. (Capoldo remembers two: one man who had plane rivets shoot into his arms and another who had part of his penis cut off.)

They were injured by the explosion Capoldo can still feel so



Seaman 1st Class Lionel Capoldo, a resident of Lake City, holds a shadow box containing his medals, ribbons (also at right) and photos of himself and his Landing Craft Support ship, LCS 51.

vividly, the only time he says true fear confronted him during the war.

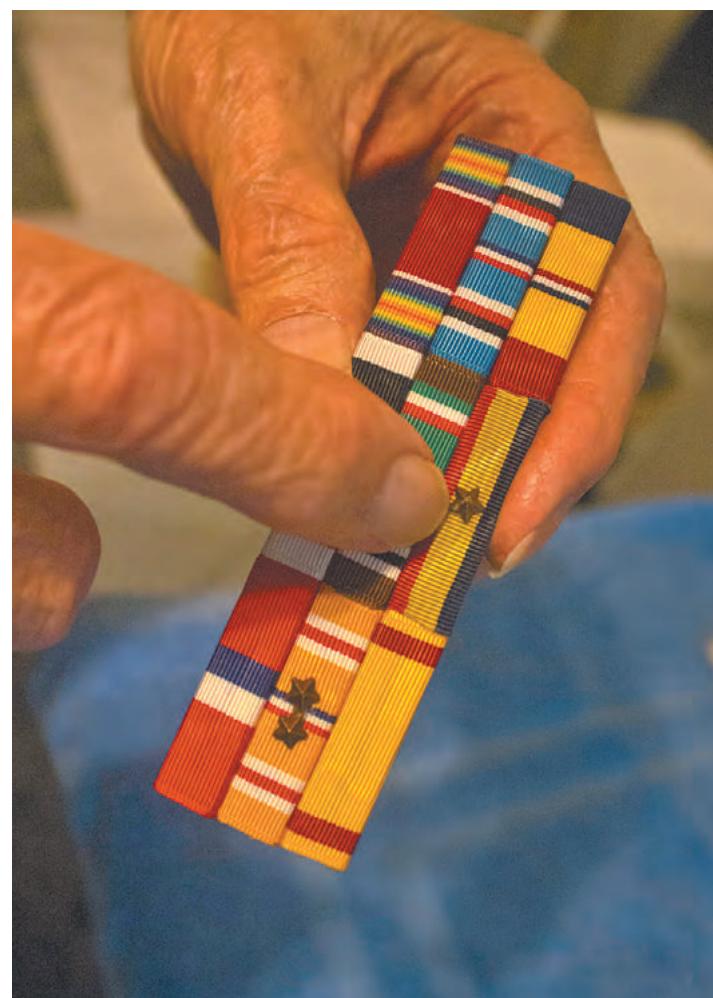
The source of the explosion, a kamikaze plane and its attached bomb, took fire and blew up maybe 25 feet from impact, sending the engine straight into the side of the ship. Capoldo had climbed to the deck just in time to witness the blow.

The ship rocked, but as soon as it steadied and showed not to be flooding, Capoldo eased up. LCS 51's fortune left it able to help the injured Laffey, using its water hoses to quell any fires before they could reach ammo loads. Capoldo manned one hose.

"Pouring water into a hole was all we were doing," he said, noting that his focus on the task prevented him from taking mental notes of the surrounding chaos. "There was a gaping hole in the deck where we were flooding it with water."

Despite being there for the Laffey kamikaze raid and the Okinawa, Iwo Jima and Omaha landings, Capoldo said he "didn't have any dramatic experiences," especially when compared with those encountered by some of his comrades in uniform.

"You take some of these soldiers ... they shot a guy — shoot the guy's brains out. Those things, they do something to a guy," he ex-





Capoldo points to himself aboard LCS 51 after it suffered a kamikaze hit while on radar picket duty off Okinawa on April 16, 1945. The plane took fire and blew up before impact, but its engine continued on and crashed into the ship. The damage is visible to the right of Capoldo's finger. Among his retirement activities is making clocks, like the one at far right.

plained. "But in the Navy, you're not that close to it as a whole — even when we got hit by a kamikaze. It's not personal. It's a group, part of a group. But it's not an individual act."

"I didn't shoot that plane down. Nobody can say, 'I shot it down.' They can say we shot it down."

A native of Hartford, Connecticut, Capoldo ended his education after middle school to help support his family of five, becoming a clerk at a First National grocery store. On circumventing age laws, he joked, "I can lie like mad."

Japan struck Pearl Harbor when he was 16, and he joined the Navy at 17, in maybe January 1943. An Army friend encouraged Capoldo to not wait around for the draft and proactively join the Navy because, before even going overseas, the Army had left him with an unbendable trigger finger.

Capoldo attended an abbreviated boot camp at the Naval Training Station in Newport, Rhode Island.

"In peacetime, boot camp is 12 weeks; I had four weeks," he said. "They cut it real short. It was at about enough time to get all your shots."

Further training in Norfolk, Virginia, taught him how to crawl under barbed wire, shoot the World War I rifle he'd been issued (and would carry with him to Europe), and fire anti-aircraft guns. After finishing training and awaiting orders briefly in Boston, he shipped out to Great Britain in late 1943, finding himself that Thanksgiving aboard the mammoth Queen Elizabeth.

The converted luxury liner served as a troop transport during the war, and Capoldo remembers eating "terrible food" from inside a swimming pool turned mess hall.

His first assignment: guarding the English Channel waters off Falmouth, England, in the anti-aircraft boat Landing Craft Flak 7. Converted from an English Landing Craft Tank ship, which transported tanks across water, the LCF had its open-air top decked over, with quarters and the magazine below and the guns up top.

In patrolling during the first half of 1944, LCF 7 never spotted a German plane, Capoldo said, but did see many B-17s returning from bombing raids "all shot to pieces" and smoking.

"And one of 'em I remember particularly," he said. "You could look right through it, right through the middle of the airplane, right from where the bomb bay was right up through."

LCF 7 patrolled right up to early June, and on the sixth, it traversed the channel during the pre-sunlight hours as part of the thousands-strong Allied naval fleet about to push its way into Adolf Hitler's fortress Europe.

"We were too young and stupid to be nervous," Capoldo said of the trip over.

LCF 7's main objective of protecting landing craft from air attacks as they hit the beach would take it near the front line, so its position was in the fleet's vanguard.

And once the ship arrived at Omaha Beach, it went fairly close to shore as it patrolled, and Capoldo recalled getting a quick peek at the beach upon arrival but not being able to distinguish much.

Yet the below-deck ammo handler's eyes never met the actual battle, mainly because he never had to carry any topside for reloading the 20mm and the 40mm "pom-pom" guns.

LCF 7's 65 enlisted sailors and four officers spotted and shot at only one enemy aircraft — a German reconnaissance plane — thanks to D-Day's surprise and a Luftwaffe force strained by airfield bombing raids, dogfights and the war's overall longevity.

The military developed a plan to ensure U.S. planes wouldn't take shots on D-Day from their own Navy — especially after the July 1943 friendly fire incident over Sicily that killed 318 soldiers and destroyed 23 troop transport planes.

"We were told that any plane coming from England towards France, we were not to shoot at it *no matter what*," Capoldo said, noting those planes returned by flying parallel to the beach and then out instead of directly back. "But any plane coming the other way was fair game."

Though Capoldo couldn't see such things, he did hear and feel D-Day.

"When the battleship Texas fired broadside, you could feel it in the boat," he said, explaining that his ship sat between the Texas and the beach at points during the battle. "The boat

would just sort of move. You could feel the concussion."

By the end of the day, more than 9,000 U.S., British and Canadian soldiers from the 160,000 at the five Normandy beach landings had been killed or injured, according to the Army. But the only semblance of tragedy Capoldo recalls seeing on D-Day was a few wrecked landing craft along the beach when he went topside that evening.

After the invasion speedily cleared an inland entry point for the Allies on their march through France and toward Germany,

LCF 7 had little to do at sea.

So after a few weeks hanging by the coast and witnessing the initial swarms of soldiers, supplies, tanks and so on being unloaded, Capoldo and his shipmates headed back to the States.

"For me, that was the easiest one," he said of Omaha, alluding to the Pacific battles to come.

Arriving in Boston in July, Capoldo was among the first D-Day veterans to step again on American soil, and he described the reception as a hero's welcome.

Within Boston's Fargo Building, a captain gave a speech about 10 p.m. to Capoldo and a few hundred other arriving soldiers — not knowing they hadn't eaten since breakfast.

"What would you guys like?" the captain asked.

"We'd like to eat!"

"What do ya mean?"

"We haven't had anything from breakfast."

"What would you like?"

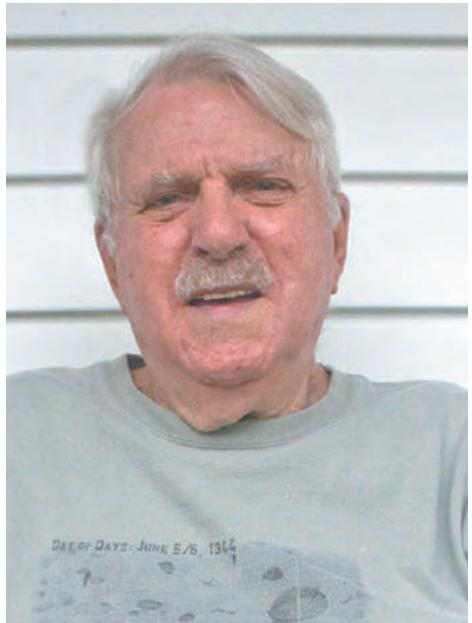
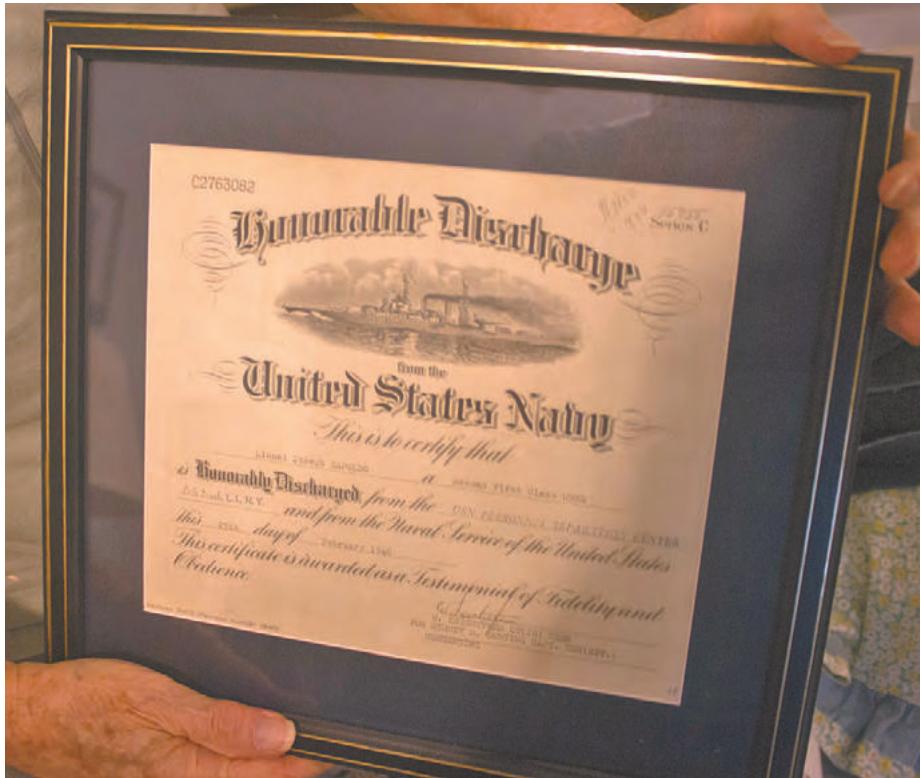
"Steak and milk!"

"He told the officers that were standing over there: 'Get the mess cooks and cook.'"

After being allowed to go home and see his mom, dad, brother and sister for about three weeks, he reported back to Boston and was sent by troop train to the West Coast.

There, Capoldo rounded out the crew of about 70 for LCS 51 because it needed only one more sailor. His new crew was rather green: Next to a mustang (someone who starts out as an enlisted person but, through longevity, moves onto being an officer) with 18 years in the Navy and a chief boatswain's mate with 12, 18-year-old Capoldo's year and a half made him third most seasoned.





Capoldo (above) and his certificate of honorable discharge (left). A photo (right) offers a better perspective of the damage LCS 51 incurred from the April 16, 1945, kamikaze attack off Okinawa.

"They hadn't seen nothin'," he said, and the tenderfoots listened naively to his embellished war stories.

"We shot all kinds of planes down," Capoldo would say of the Normandy invasion. "We got shot at; we shot back. We got hit and then almost sunk. ... The captain come around and [said], 'You gotta cut out those stories.'"

After stops at Pearl Harbor and already-taken Saipan, Capoldo saw his first — albeit brief — Pacific action in the Philippines.

"We shot into the jungle a couple times" from along the coast, he said. "We don't know if we hit anything or not. ... Supposed to be in support of the Army — I don't know. We may have been shooting at ghosts for all I know."

Once LCS 51 got to Iwo Jima to support the Marine landings there, the routine was fairly the same: fire at enemy targets on the island, starting with Mount Suribachi, from just offshore.

"It was very helpful, and to a degree," 91-year-old Gainesville resident Bob Gasche, a Marine who landed the first day at Iwo Jima, said of the Naval assault. "And the reason I'm adding to a degree is Gen. [Tadamichi] Kuribachi, the head Japanese general, ordered prior to the invasion 300 mining engineers from Japan to come to Iwo Jima and dig tunnels and caves, underground communication centers, hospitals, supply centers, etc., so that they were underground. ... We would've wiped them out had they not been so concealed."

Unlike Omaha Beach, Capoldo spent a fair amount of time on deck because of all the reloading — plus his ship now had rocket

launchers in addition to the regular guns, and he had to go topside each launch in case one misfired and sparked the magazine.

This allowed him to see dead Marines on the beach and in the water, especially during LCS 51's new task: towing mangled landing craft from the beach.

"The beach was so crowded with Higgins boats, we had to go back in, tie a line on them, drag them out into deep water and let them sink so other craft could come in," he said, noting that his boat suffered no casualties but was hit by small-arms fire.

As the Marines swept across the island, LCS 51 would move in to fire on a designated target, turn back to sea, drift and repeat.

"All you could see was the coral rock, and you could see the shells exploding," Capoldo said. "You couldn't tell whether you were hitting anything or not."

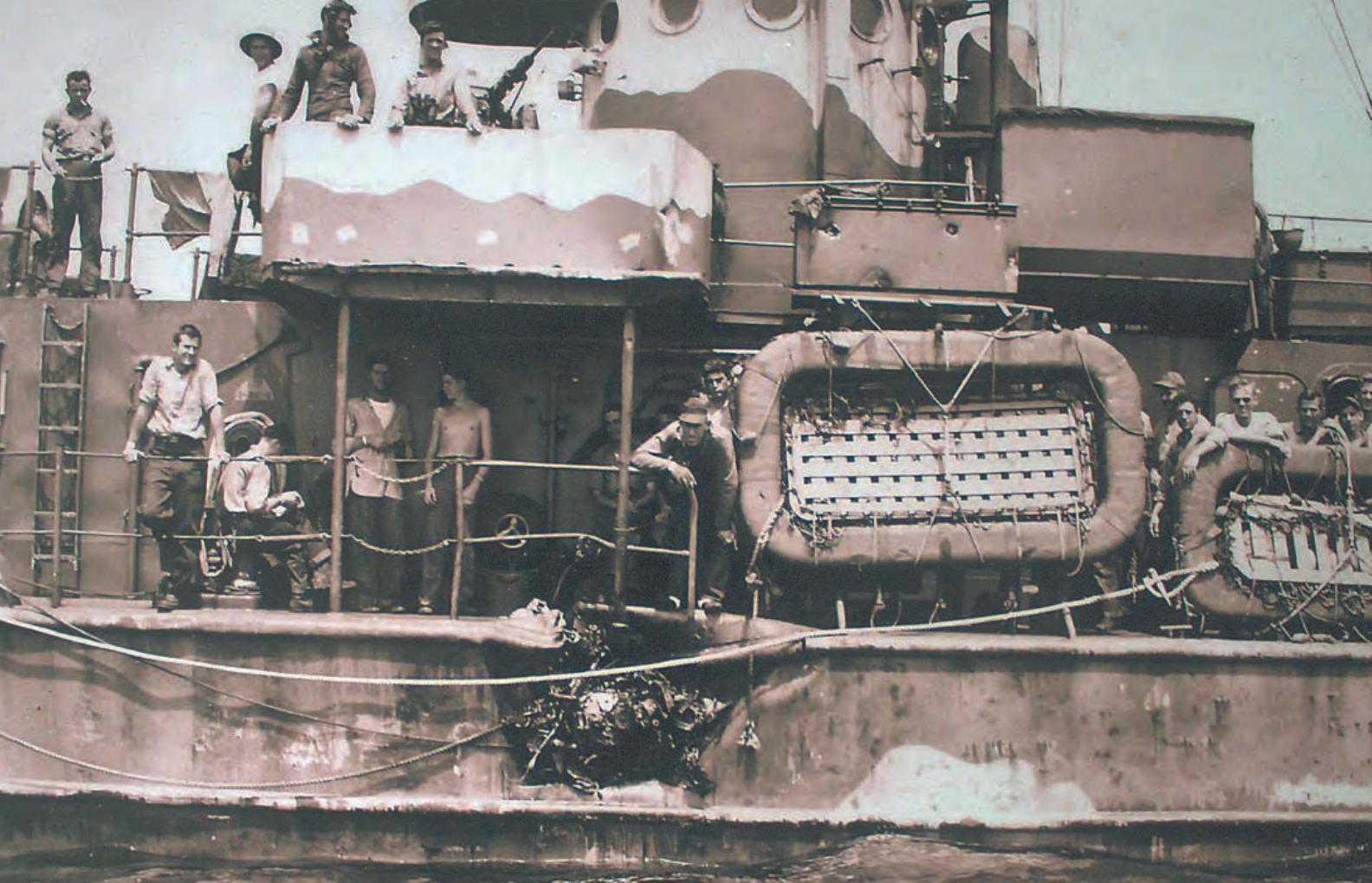
Something the ship didn't hit was friendlies, thanks to the forward-most Marine signaling the line.

"There was always some poor Marine with a stick with a flag on it: Don't shoot behind me," Capoldo said.

The battle of more than a month across February and March 1945 claimed the lives of 6,800 U.S. soldiers from the Marines and Navy. Before Capoldo sailed from the island, he saw the fruits of the invasion's labor: the first B-29 bombers landing on the island following raids against the Japanese.

He then returned to the Philippines, where he caught a USO show from Bob Hope.

"That whole field was just full of people, and ... I was so far



back I couldn't see," he said, adding that he wasn't star-struck. "Even to this day, I wouldn't go across the street to see him."

Okinawa came next, but from a Naval perspective, the troop landings were "a cakewalk," Capoldo said, because the Japanese had withdrawn inland. The Navy's true struggle instead came at sea at the hands of the kamikazes, with 47 ships sunk and many more damaged from October 1944 to July 1945, according to kamikaze researcher Bill Gordon.

The kamikaze attacks on the Laffey, LCS 116 and LCS 51 would be Capoldo's final time in action.

"We had no more ammunition," he said. "We had an engine sticking out of our side. So that was the end of actual combat."

Again in the Philippines, following the dropping of the two atomic bombs in August 1945, word spread from the radio that Japan had surrendered. Because the news came at night, the celebration included somewhat of a fireworks show.

"In Leyte Gulf, where we were, every ship was firing off rockets — rocket flares — to celebrate," Capoldo said.

He moved on to participate in the occupation of Japan and Korea, which had been held by Japan until it lost the war, as well as China during its civil war.

After leaving the military in early 1946, Capoldo returned to

Hartford and worked in pipefitting and construction until sailing down to Fort Lauderdale in 1965, doing odds and ends jobs around boatyards, and living in Florida ever since.

In retirement, the father of three, grandfather of two and great-grandfather of two has found joy in traveling the country with his wife, Hattie, and building clocks in his garage workshop.

Reflecting on the war with others is something Capoldo said is relatively new for him — something he's done only in recent years through meeting with other veterans at the D-Day Normandy Veterans of North Central Florida group, which comes together once a month at Conestoga's Restaurant in Alachua.

"You feel sorry for those guys," he said of the 416,800 U.S. soldiers who died in combat during the war. "I'm glad I'm not one of them. Whether I'd wanna take one of their places or not, I don't think so."

"But if I had to," he added, a rush of emotion stepping forward to conclude the interview, "I would've." ■

If you know a WWII veteran in North Central Florida who would like to tell his or her story to Senior Times, please email Michael Stone at MichaelStone428@gmail.com.