

Veteran Robert McAlpine

Sailor Helped Carry Lost Sullivan Brothers' Memory Through WWII

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STONE

On a pleasant weekday afternoon in his humble, charming Gainesville home, Robert McAlpine flips through a portfolio of drawings finished some 70 years ago.

They bring a touch of horror to this peaceful day: helmeted men stationed at hulking guns, planes shredded to pieces in midair, sailors bobbing in the water beside a fire-engulfed ship.

Personal cameras weren't allowed for Navy crews during World War II, so after the day's action, McAlpine would grab some colored pencils and sketch what he remembered.

This was his way of documenting his two years at sea on the U.S.S. The Sullivans, named after the five brothers from Iowa who were killed by a torpedo in 1942 that finished off an already-damaged U.S.S. Juneau and spared only 13 of its crew of 700.

Despite the destruction happening to many ships in the Pacific theater, from torpedoes, bombs, kamikazes and other hazards, The Sullivans never suffered damage from enemy attacks. One crewman, an engineer, was lost, but this was during a recreational outing to an already-captured beach, McAlpine recalled, noting that the engineer couldn't swim and could have drowned, though the exact reason was never identified.

Perhaps The Sullivans averted disaster so well because of its shamrock logo, or maybe, as McAlpine, a 93-year-old retiree from the U.S. Forest Service, put it simply: "We were blessed."

The Sullivans time in combat, from the Marshall Islands in early 1944 to near Okinawa in April 1945, took Lieutenant McAlpine on a voyage to waters off a host of other Japanese-controlled islands, including Saipan, Guam, and Iwo Jima.

He served as a deck officer for the rear of the ship, coming into the position after graduating from the University of South Carolina's Naval ROTC in 1943 as a member of the program's first class.

In 1940, at age 19, he was excited when he first heard of USC's upcoming ROTC program, but that's because he assumed it would be for the Army. McAlpine was raised on 120 acres of farmland on the outskirts of Union, South Carolina, and hadn't really been around water.

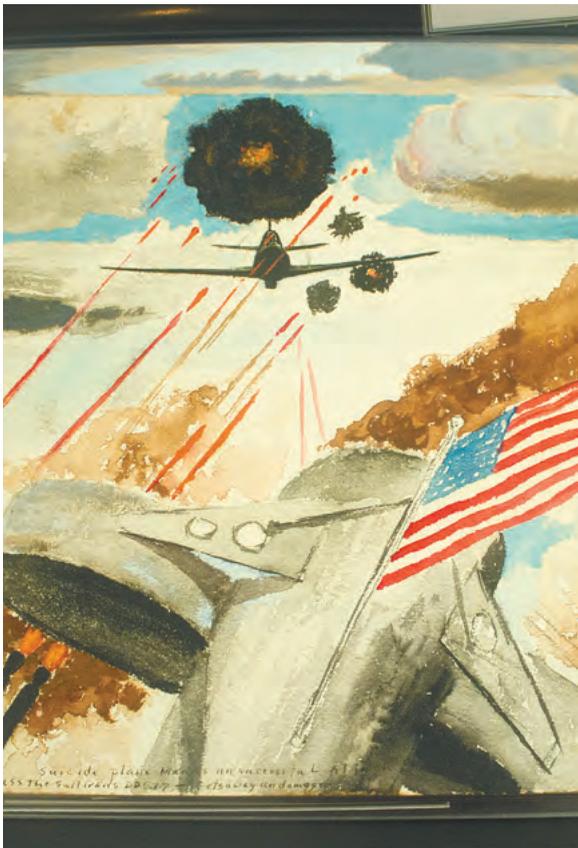
"I thought, 'I don't want anything to have to do with Naval ROTC,'" he remembered. "The nearest thing to Union was a creek that was ankle deep — there's hardly a place to swim over there unless we dam up a waterhole."

Looking back, though, at his military career and the war, he said he's thankful for the path that carried him through unharmed, as also happened for his brothers Buck and Jim. (He did lose his youngest brother, John, a P-51 pilot, during the Korean War.)

Nevertheless, McAlpine witnessed more than his fair share of destruction aboard The Sullivans. Its wartime chronology is dotted with instances of neighboring ships being hit hard and losing many sailors.

One such ship, the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Bunker Hill, was hit by two kamikaze planes on May 11, 1945, just a few hundred feet from The Sullivans. Almost 400 of the carrier's crew were killed, but The Sullivans managed to pluck 166 survivors from the water.

Descending below deck after the rescue, McAlpine noticed The Sullivans' doctor tending to a burn victim from the Bun-



(Top) Lorena and Robert McAlpine, who have been married for nearly 70 years, stand in front of their Gainesville home. (Bottom right) McAlpine points to himself among the crew of the U.S.S. The Sullivans. (Bottom left) While many of McAlpine's art pieces are rough sketches drawn aboard The Sullivans with color pencils, this painting of a Zero attack was done after the war, allowing him to add much more detail.





McAlpine, who was carried to the waters off many of the Pacific front's most infamous islands while serving on the *The Sullivans*, holds a photo of himself in his Navy uniform (top) and a patch logo of *The Sullivans* (bottom).

into the deck, it pulled up with only about 100 feet to spare.

McAlpine realized afterward that the gun malfunction worked in his ship's favor.

"We figured that because nobody fired at him, he might have decided that was one of his ships," he said. "He had to make up his mind, and we were pretty close to home, his home [of Japan]."

The plane did circle around to get another look, but with the whole ship now alert, its flak fire scared the plane away.

The *Bunker Hill* and diving *Zero* events happened near the end of *The Sullivans* service in the war, and it saw its last combat on May 14, shooting down a plane in an air attack.

The ship eventually headed back to California to be refitted for the planned invasion of the Japanese mainland. During the modifications, the crew was given 20 days to visit home, and while they were away, news of Japan's surrender came over the radio.

In Union, many of the 11,000 residents gathered on Main Street, hollering with joy at the war's close, but McAlpine didn't feel like doing the same.

"My family went to church because, to me, it didn't seem like a time for celebration," he said. "There were a bunch of people coming home, but there was a bunch of people that weren't coming home. The Sullivan boys weren't coming home."

One cheery note from McAlpine's return to Union was seeing a neighbor named Lorena. Before the war, they got to go on only one or two dates, but it was enough to keep them writing to each other throughout McAlpine's service.

Lorena, who has been volunteering at Alachua County hospitals since 1977, said she still has the letters.

"At one time, he criticized my grammar in one of my letters," she said with a laugh, "and I thought, 'Well wait one minute, young man. Maybe you won't get a letter for a while.'"

The two are now approaching their 70th wedding anniversary and have seven grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

When the war ended, McAlpine still had to report back for duty aboard *The Sullivans*. There, he penned a letter to Alleta Sullivan, saying he couldn't celebrate because mothers like her wouldn't have their kids coming back.

She wrote back on Sept. 14, 1945: "I love to receive letters from the officers and men of *The Sullivans* as it helps to cheer me up because since the war is over, I miss my five sons more and more. But I know they and other boys gave their lives for their country." ■

ker Hill whose head looked more like a pumpkin.

"You could barely discern his features," McAlpine recalled. "And I said to the doc, 'Is he dead?' But the guy spoke — when he spoke, I got spooked and got the hell out of there. I mean, I wasn't expecting this corpse to say anything, but he did. I doubt that he survived, to tell you the truth."

The Sullivans wasn't without close calls itself.

One day, from his aft station, McAlpine was the first to spot a Japanese *Zero* fly overhead and disappear into clouds. He grabbed his telephone and alerted the bridge, but no one did anything. So he ordered the nearby gunner to ready his 40mm gun, aim in the cloud, and fire.

The gunner couldn't shoot, though, because the gun was malfunctioning, McAlpine later found out. Frustrated, McAlpine threw his helmet at the gun and yelled again for the gunner to fire.

"Everybody was scared to death," he said of his shipmates. "When they looked up and saw [the plane] coming, they knew their number was up."

The *Zero* dove toward *The Sullivans*, but instead of crashing