

Harry Johnson. Interviewed 19 Nov. 1999 (1600-200) at his house in Bloomington.
He was a store keeper aboard the *Witter* (DE-636), and recounts April 6, 1945.

We were at General Quarters, and I was at gun three. There were three of them were attacking an APD off our starboard side. We were on anti-submarine screening. Beckenridge was our gun captain, and he kept screaming "permission to open fire. Permission to open fire." We didn't get any answer from the bridge. I was on the cross hairs right on this plane. Beckenridge said, "F*** it! Open Fire." And we did. We hit this plane because we could see smoke coming, but we were firing proximity fuses. We could say now that we could have done this or that, but you could see our gun locker—the shell locker behind the gun—we had armor-piercing, proximity, and the anti-personnel in different shelves. The loaders kept grabbing these proximity, which nobody, I mean, everyone got excited and we were hitting him. We hit him.

Then they came back after us; there were three of them and they came after us. Lt. Bash, the gunnery officer said that he never heard a three inch firing as fast as we were firing. They came around and I was tracking him all the way, then the others came around. This I can't absolutely guarantee, but guys on gun two tell me that they knocked the other out. The third one went down port side and dropped a bomb—they must have been over a block or so—and we never did. I am following the one that was hit, the kamikaze.

He came in, and what he was going to do was come in after us and try to take the bridge [coming in from the aft to bow direction, totally different than the one that attacked the WILLMARTH]. I followed him all the way down and this is something I will always remember the rest of my life. This I swear to it. I was on that scope and had him down on the scope, and all I could think was 'wonder what my mother's gonna do when she gets that letter edged in black.' At the last second or so, they swung the ship and turned so he hit us on the starboard side. [less damage done because the ship was turned? "YES"]

Herrmann was the skipper, and his story to me is "I should have kept that damn helmet on because all I could picture was that goddamn bomb coming down and hitting me on top of the head, on the open bridge."

Who gave the order, whether he gave it—he must have given the order to swing the ship. But that time I figured I was gone. He was going to get me because he was coming right dead on, right in my cross hairs, right into me.

We couldn't fire at night, or even in the day [talking about being tied up at Kerama Retto awaiting to go into a dry dock] because they were afraid of shooting into each other. When I got transferred to the reefer, a kid got shot by another ship.

One this one, when he came around, I followed him around till the barrel around until I hit the guard rail, the stop, to stop the barrel. That's when I looked up and he was just coming into the ship then. I was looking at him and the plane come in and I went to the other side. I swore he would come flying out the other side. I say, he hit the starboard side and I thought he'd come on right through us.

The plane hit right in the forward fire room. We took the after mess hall. See, my bunk was right in the after mess hall. IT was so damn hot next to that wall that I'd find some place else to sleep. That took my bunk, my locker, everything I had; I had dungarees on, shoes and socks, and that's all I had left. I had to wear everyone else's clothes.

All the electricity was gone so we had to go aboard another ship to get something to eat.

I was working the reefer and the *Bowers* [DE-637] pulled alongside. We were yacking back and forth (his buddy who rode over on the *Witter* to get transferred to the ship; they were the same rate, but wasn't at this working party.) It wasn't an hour or so later that they were hit. They took a beating.

We sat there till the end of July then we started back. We only had one screw and one fire room so we had to no more than ten knots. If any rough weather showed up, we were to stop at the closest harbor.

We sat through something like 250 GQs, just sitting on the gun. Couldn't do anything. It is an experience that was wonderful, but I wouldn't want to go through it again.

They sent me down to Norfolk, where the ship was formed. We sat there and were put in unit X. We had muster every morning. They would call your name then a number then you would go over and stand in that square. A couple of days they didn't call my name. Then they called my name and the number "six thirty-six" and here was a square with '636'