

David Middleton

David Middleton was a general engineering major at North Carolina State University in December 1941. He and his girlfriend were coming out of a music concert when they heard the news of the Pearl Harbor attack, he recalls people “shouting it in the streets.” At the time it didn’t hit Middleton what the attack meant for his future. Later on a friend convinced him to join the navy since he was going to have serve anyway and the navy was taking college students in a officers.

Middleton signed up in early 1942 and was given the rank of temporary ensign with the understanding that when he graduated college he would become a permanent. Middleton graduated in May and was sent to Cornell University for a 16 week course on diesel engines. This was the total amount of training that he received before getting his first assignment at Key West, Florida in November 1942.

There he was assigned to a YP or yard Patrol craft. This was a small, less than 50 feet and lightly armed, one machine gun, converted yacht used to patrol the defensive minefields found around Key West. The vessels main role was to keep friendly vessels from running afoul of the mines.

When Middleton arrived there he was one of three officers assigned to the craft. At the time of his arrival the ship was in the dockyard having its engines overhauled. By the time this work was done the other two officers had been transferred out leaving him in command of the craft. As he put it he depended on “the Florida born sailors to teach me how to run the ship.” He learned quickly and the patrol craft conducted her missions successfully.

For the most part Middleton describes his time in Key West as “easy duty.” They could fish and swim on their off time and rarely ran into the enemy. Mostly they herded friendly vessels away from the minefields, however wayward vessels did cause excitement when they ran into the fields and a few were actually lost in this manner. The war came a bit closer on one occasion. This occurred as they were in an anchorage off of Fort Jefferson, located seventy miles west of Key West, riding out a storm. It was dark but in the horizon they were able to make out the silhouette of a German u-boat. With an armament consisting of a single machine gun he decided the best strategy was to hide, “as we had no way of fighting it”, and the u-boat passed harmlessly by.

By April of 1943 Middleton received orders to report to the US Navy Mine Warfare School in Yorktown, Virginia where he would be instructed in minesweeping techniques. In the meantime he had been promoted and in late 1943, after completing his course, he traveled to Bellingham, Washington to become the executive officer of a newly built minesweeper, *YMS-286* (certain classes of ships did not have names but alpha-numerical designations instead). He jokingly claimed this was due to his “vast experience”. The vessel he was assigned to was 136 feet long with a crew of four officers and 29 men. It was powered by two 500 horsepower engines with an additional 500 horsepower engine to be used in sweeping mines. The vessel also carried a heavier armament than his patrol craft; one 3-inch cannon on the bow and two 20-mm automatic anti-aircraft cannons in the waist of the ship. As executive officer Middleton was essentially the second in command of the vessel. He served as a back-up to the captain and carried out

The crew took the ship to Seattle, Washington on a shakedown cruise to work out any mechanical problems the ship might have. It also gave them a chance to train and to install certain missing equipment. From Seattle they sailed to San Diego and from there to Pearl Harbor. At Pearl Harbor they were assigned to a section base at the bottleneck entrance to the harbor. From this base the ship, along with other craft, would patrol the seaward entrance to Pearl Harbor to ward off enemy submarines. This threat was quite real as Japanese midget submarines had penetrated into Pearl Harbor during the air attack on December 7, 1941.

They would also train with friendly submarines in anti-submarine tactics. They used their radar and sonar to detect the friendly submarine and then conduct mock attacks with their cannons and depth charges. This patrolling and training was occasionally interrupted with other duties, such as sailing out to meet a friendly submarine and escort it through the defenses into Pearl Harbor. They also had a two month detachment to Midway Island in the central Pacific where they towed targets for shore batteries.

This was important work but Middleton found that it “tended to get a little boring.” They had little opportunity to get away overnight so most of his off-duty hours were spent at an officer’s club in Waikiki and learning to play golf. He did find one advantage of the duty was that the crew was able to add plenty of fish to their diet. This meant they could save much of the food allowance they received from the navy to purchase better types of food to supplement the fish. They could do this because the patrol task required them to cruise at 5-6 knots, a perfect speed to trawling for fish! The crew would throw multiple lines off the stern when they were out on patrol and, as Middleton says, “they caught a lot of fish.”

This duty ended when the ship was transferred to the Pacific Fleet and attached to an amphibious landing group. *YMS-286* served as an escort to the amphibious group as it sailed from Pearl Harbor to Manus in the Admiralty Islands, a group of islands north of New Guinea. Here they were to prepare for the invasion of Leyte Gulf in the Philippines, set for October 1944. This was the start of General Douglas MacArthur’s campaign to liberate the Philippines.

The role of minesweepers like *YMS-286* was to enter defended Japanese waters and clear a lane through the minefield so that the invasion ships could get near enough shore to land the invasion troops. Sweeping lanes in the minefield took time which meant the minesweepers, escorted by a destroyer, had to enter Leyte Gulf three days ahead of the scheduled landing to begin sweeping. In order to meet the invasion deadline the minesweepers had to start their sweeping operation in a typhoon. The conditions for sailing were bad, let alone trying to tow minesweeping gear behind and too one side of the ship. The rough weather caused the sweep gear to trail directly behind the ship and consequently to sweep a much narrower lane than they were supposed to. This in turn meant that the safe room they had to sail was much narrower and at one point Middleton remembers spotting a Japanese mine in a swell only thirty or forty feet from the ship. Fortunately none of the minesweepers hit any mines and the Japanese did not interfere with the operation with other means. However on the way out Middleton thought they might still be in for trouble. He was monitoring the ships radar as the escorting destroyer led the minesweepers out of Leyte Gulf in a column. The ship was taking the column right into an area that most probably contained another Japanese minefield. Middleton assumed the destroyer captain knew where he was going but soon enough the destroyer radioed “I have just struck a mine.” Three minutes later another

radio message declared the destroyer had struck another mine. At this point the minesweepers scattered and made their own way out of the gulf to safety. The destroyer survived and despite the bad weather the minesweepers were able to clear the gulf so that the invasion could proceed.

Once the invasion troops had landed the minesweepers, along with other escorting warships, took up positions in Leyte Gulf to protect the vulnerable troop transports and supply ships. *YMS-286* was stationed off of Tacloban. They did not suffer any kamikaze attacks at this time but Middleton did experience his first air raid and the crew of *YMS-286* succeeded in shooting down an attacking Japanese plane. Air raids weren't the only danger the Japanese presented to the invading forces. They also attempted to send their own warships to attack the invasion fleet off of Leyte. Middleton did not directly participate in the battles to defend the fleet but has vivid memories of destroyers quickly raising anchor one evening at dusk and rapidly steaming southward to intercept a Japanese task force. The crew was worried until they saw many bright flashes and flares and heard the echoing booms of a naval battle about twenty miles away. At that point Middleton went to bed, he assumed if the Americans had succeeded in intercepting the Japanese than he was safe!

After the Leyte Gulf landings Middleton and *YMS-286* returned to Manus and then participated at Lingayen Gulf north of Manila. He experienced a few air raids there also. They also experienced an amusing episode early one morning when they thought they detected the wake of a ship trying to enter the invasion fleet anchorage at high speed. They immediately opened fire with their 3-inch gun and, by following the glowing tracer in the rear of the rounds, could tell they were hitting the target yet the enemy ship continued on. As dawn approached and the skies lightened Middleton made out, much to the embarrassment of himself and the crew that they had been firing at a reef! The waves breaking over the reef had looked exactly like the wake of a ship at high speed in the half-light before dawn. As Middleton put it, "We shot that reef up good!"

After the Lingayen Gulf landings *YMS-286* returned to Manus Island to rest and refit for the invasion of Okinawa in early spring of 1945. Middleton was not very impressed with Manus, the activities for the crew were limited to going ashore in parties to get drunk on an almost desolate island. Middleton and his crew weren't interested in going ashore to these parties. Life aboard a small ship in the navy was quite different from that in the larger ships. Conditions were much more informal since the crew and officers tended to get to know each other quite well. The watch standing practice was also quite different on a small ship. On larger ships crews would be constantly rotated through different watch schedules, never staying with one long enough to get used to it. Middleton and his crew didn't see a use in that and created a watch schedule that allowed men to keep the same schedule for a week at a time so that they could have some routine in the shipboard lives for a week at least. This worked quite well for the officers and crew. Middleton was proud of the crew, remembering "the guys were good." He was proud of their sailing ability and their skill with the ships weapons.

In fact life at Manus Island was not complete boredom. During the refit period between the landings at Lingayen and Leyte Gulfs *YMS-286* experienced a tragic event. They were anchored near the ammunition ship *Mount Hood* when it accidentally exploded. Debris from the *Mt.*

Hood rained down upon *YMS-286* putting 27 holes of varying sizes in injured 3 men so badly they had to be sent ashore. The entire crew of the *Mt. Hood* was killed.

For the Okinawa invasion the minesweepers gain went in ahead of the invasion force to make lanes in the Japanese minefields. *YMS-286* and other minesweepers began sweeping operations to the north and west of Okinawa seven days before the landings. While conducting these maneuvers they came under air attack. During one of these attacks the crew of *YMS-286*'s 3-inch gun shot the wing off of a Japanese torpedo plane. In addition two Japanese fighters were also shot down, one by the 3-inch gun and one by the 20-mm automatic anti-aircraft cannons. The invasion of Okinawa was fiercely contested by the Japanese. They attacked with both conventional bombers and kamikazes. Fortunately *YMS-286* was sent to Saipan, in the central Pacific, before the battle ended.

Middleton was quite surprised to find orders in Saipan sending him home. He had been on shipboard duty for two years and the navy felt he had done his part and deserved less strenuous duty. Middleton was surprised but grateful. He had gotten married while on leave from the Pacific fighting and was eager to get back to his new wife. So it transpired that he was in Solomons, Maryland at a navy mine school on VE Day in May, 1945. He recalled a lot of excitement that was soon replaced with notions of "when am I going home?" among the men.

Very soon Middleton found himself out of the navy and back in Raleigh looking for a job. He quickly found employment with the Kimberly-Clarke engineering firm as field engineer in Wisconsin. Despite being happy to get home and out of the war Middleton joined the reserves in 1949 and found himself called up to active duty in the Korean War. This time it was no small minesweeper he was assigned to. Instead he found himself on the staff of a navy amphibious group on a large amphibious command ship. He was one of 50-60 men who were tasked with planning the operations of a group of ships whose role it was to land troops in an amphibious assault. This was quite a change from his days of sweeping lanes in enemy minefields for landing ships to get to the invasion beaches.

Middleton took away some important lesson from his experience in the military. His most important was that if a person wants to do something they can. They just have to have the will to make themselves do what is necessary to reach their goals. As he says, "you might not get rich but you'll feel good about yourself."