

# Four and half days of agony in a lifeboat

## Injured veteran recovers, and returns to the action at sea

*EDITOR'S NOTE: In recognition of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, Lawrence Township Memorial Committee, in cooperation with the Ledger, will feature a column each week during the anniversary year profiling a Lawrence resident.*

The telegram to Mrs. Frances Calderone arrived on Oct. 10, 1943 and read: "THE NAVY DEPARTMENT REGRETS TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON JAMES FRANK CALDERONE SEAMAN FIRST CLASS US NAVY HAS BEEN WOUNDED IN ACTION IN THE PERFORMANCE OF HIS DUTY IN THE SERVICE OF HIS COUN-

TRY." The news that his ship had been sunk, however, had already reached the 18-year-old seaman's mother by other means, as he lay in a British R.A.F. hospital in Aden.

Jim Calderone was born on March 5, 1925, in the Eldridge Park section of Lawrence. He attended Eldridge Park School and Trenton High School and enlisted in the U.S. Navy in December, 1942. After boot training and gunnery schools he was assigned to the Navy Armed Guard as part of a gun crew on the U.S.S. Cornelius T. Spenser, a Liberty ship at New Orleans. The Navy Armed Guard were the unsung heroes of the Navy. They were out-manned and

out-gunned by the enemy, and their only job aboard ship was to man the guns. Jim's Liberty ship carried a crew of 45 merchant seamen and 27 Navy gunners.

"We sailed to Hampton Roads, Va., in May, 1943," Jim began, "and loaded our cargo of aerial bombs and food supplies. We were alone, without a convoy, heading east in the Atlantic Ocean when we changed course and went through the Panama Canal, down the west coast of South America, between Cape Horn and Antarctica, and across the South Atlantic to Durban, South Africa where we stopped to refuel. That's the first land we saw in over a month and a half. From there we went through the Red Sea to Taufiq, Egypt, where the Suez Canal begins, and unloaded our cargo. Then we sailed to the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and picked up iron ore for ballast. Our armament on the ship was two 3.50 deck guns and eight 20mm guns and could be used against both air and surface attacks.

"We were in the Indian Ocean on Sept. 21, and I had just eaten breakfast and in my quarters playing a harmonica at 8:05 a.m. when a torpedo hit the ship with a terrific explosion. We all ran to our battle stations to man the deck guns, and poured almost 40 rounds in the direction the torpedo came from, even though we couldn't see the periscope. About 15 minutes later the second torpedo hit us, and must have got the ammunition magazine directly below us. Somebody told me later that I was blown 35 to 50 feet in the air and landed back down on the gun deck. Seven others of our crew were blown overboard and all badly injured. I had a high explosive shell in my hands at the time, and don't know what happened to it. When I came to, we were abandoning ship and the crew had passed me up for dead. One of the

## VETERAN PROFILE

### Nicholas Loveless

crew, Leodore Campbell, saw I was still breathing and helped me over the side.

"My wrist and back were both dislocated and I couldn't hang on, so I just dropped in the water. I was drifting toward the torpedo hole in the side of the ship and the suction started to pull me in, and at that point I didn't care if it did or not. Campbell saved my life the second time when he pulled me away and pushed me on a life raft. The third torpedo then hit our ship and it went down, all within about 30 minutes. After that the merchant seamen picked us off the raft and into a lifeboat."

Jim lay in agony along with 17 other survivors in the lifeboat, living on water, biscuits and malted milk tablets for 4 1/2 days when they were finally picked up by the H.M.S. Relentless, a British destroyer, and taken to an R.A.F. hospital in Aden. He never learned how many men survived the sinking, but did hear that some of the survivors made it to shore in East Africa.

Jim spent the next seven weeks in the hospital recovering from shrapnel wounds in his left eye, chin and leg, broken wrist, five broken ribs, dislocated pelvis, fracture of both knee caps, and broken right foot. When he was able to be moved, he boarded ship for his return to the U.S. That ship almost capsized in a storm and had a near collision with another ship enroute.

In April, 1944, Jim was given a

See VETERAN, Page 3A

Thursday, July 6, 1995



As a World War II seaman, James Calderone took on one of the most unsung Navy posts, defending an out-manned and out-gunned Liberty ship sailing without the protection of a convoy.

# Veteran

Continued from Page 2A

medical discharge under honorable conditions and awarded the Purple Heart. He returned home to Lawrence but soon became bored, as all his friends were away in the service. Partially recovered from his injuries, and still feeling an obligation to his country, he enrolled in the Merchant Marine at San Pedro, Calif. and shipped out on a tanker carrying aviation gasoline to Hawaii. On his second trip to Hawaii, a tanker ahead of his was torpedoed and all hands were lost as it lit up the entire sky that night. His third trip was on the SS Greenville Victory, a Victory ship, with a cargo of amphibious tanks and food supplies.

"We sailed to Hawaii," Jim continued, "then to the Marshall Islands, Eniwetock, Saipan, Tinian, and pulled into the harbor at Okinawa at daybreak of D-Day plus seven. All the night before we could hear big guns and bombs going off on the island. Just before we dropped anchor a Japanese Kamikaze plane crossed about 50 feet above our bow and hit a destroyer right next to us. It made a tremendous hole in the side of the ship and killed a lot of the crew. Before we left Okinawa, my brother Tony found out I was aboard ship and came out to see me. He was a marine and looked like he had been through it all, his uniform was worn and covered with mud and he had grenades and ammunition clips in all his pockets. By the time we got back to Washington the war was just about over and I decided that I had enough and went home."

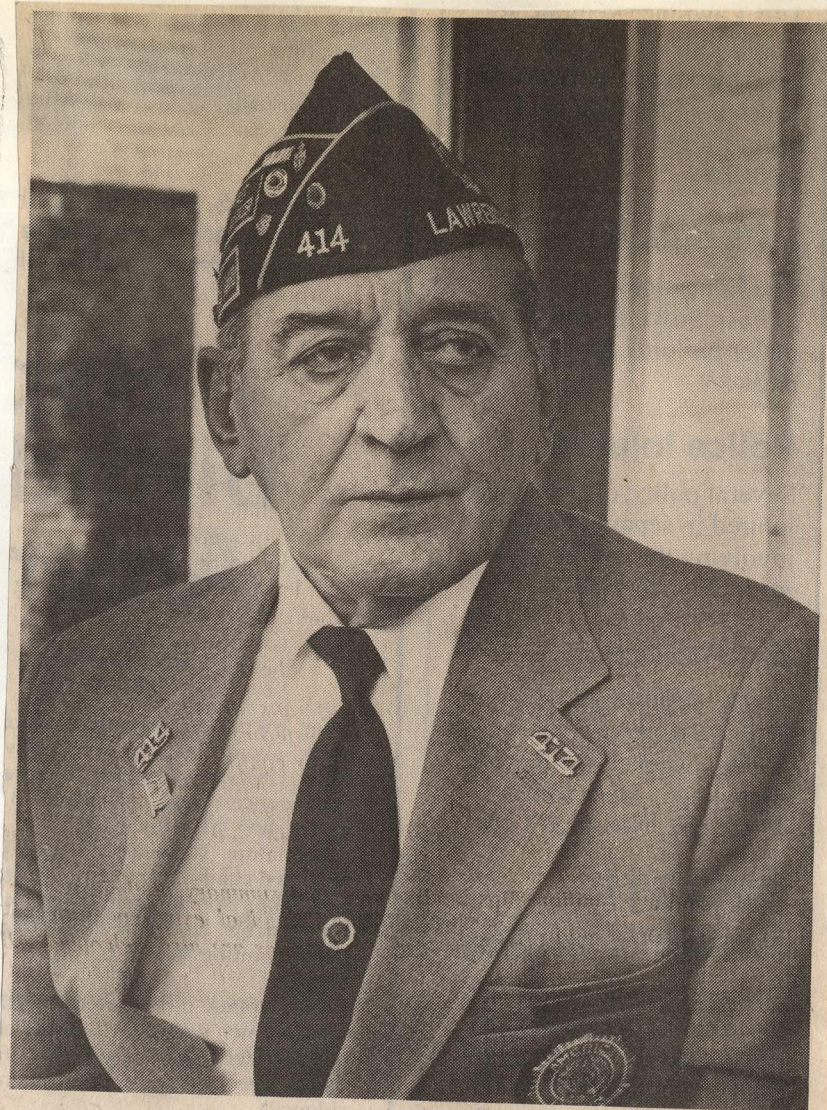
After Jim returned home to Lawrence he held various jobs, and in 1961 went with Gulf Oil Company as a tank truck driver, retiring from there in 1985. In 1958 he married Gloria Jean Elliott, a school teacher

from Tioga County, Pa. They have lived at 78 Fairfield Ave. for the past 30 years, and have four children, Maria, now living in Kentucky, Darwin, Rocky and Linda, in addition to six grandchildren. Jim is a life member of the D.A.V., past commander and long-time member of American Legion Post 414, and VFW Post 3022, and usually visits one or the other almost daily. He has enjoyed hunting and fishing over the years, and still never turns down an offer to fish the lakes and streams in the area.

Jim Calderone's close brush with death in the Indian Ocean did not deter him from again offering his service in the Pacific until the close of the war. After 52 years, his old war injuries still bother him at times and keep him from being as active as he would like to be.

It is ironic that upon his return to civilian life he had not yet reached his 21st birthday and was still too young to vote and could not be served alcoholic beverages in a tavern — at least not legally. But young men mature overnight in wartime, and who is to say that exceptions should not be made.

*The Veterans Memorial Committee is asking veterans from World War II and other conflicts to provide a photograph in uniform, along with their name, present address, branch of service and unit, where and when they served, their principal assignment and summary of their service. Their individual experiences or unusual stories are also welcomed. All photographs will be returned. Families of deceased veterans are also encouraged to submit articles. All materials should be sent to The Lawrence Township Veterans Memorial Committee, P.O. Box 55966, Trenton, N.J. 08638. Inquires may be made by calling 882-9108.*



Staff photo by Mark Czajkowski

Thanks to the help of a Navy crewman who saved his life twice within the span of 30 minutes, James Calderone can look back on both a harrowing Navy career and a fulfilling life that followed.