

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

