

Five Down

There were some 16,353,659 United States military personnel who served in World War II; 407,316 lost their lives in that colossal global struggle, the largest human conflict in the history of Mankind. This is a small remembrance of but five.

The largest of the Solomon Islands, Guadalcanal is a volcanic island covering approximately 2,510 square miles in the South Pacific. In 1942, it was occupied by the Japanese. Thus it was that in August, 1942, U.S. forces landed there and began the heart-breaking process of invasion. It was far from easy; mostly jungle and mountains, it would be six long months before Guadalcanal was secure. The fighting was bitter, both on land, especially around Henderson Field, and on the surrounding seas, notably at the Santa Cruz Islands and off Cape Esperance and Lunga Point.

It was in one of the numerous naval battles for Guadalcanal that a Japanese submarine torpedoed and sank an American cruiser, the USS Juneau, on November 13, 1942. The Juneau carried a 700-man crew. After an eight-day search, rescuers found only ten survivors in the shark-infested waters. Of the 690 men lost, five stood out in a very unique way: George, Joseph, Francis, Madison, and Albert...all Sullivans..... all brothers. Their deaths—the only time since the Civil War that an American family had lost five sons in battle—became a national symbol of sacrifice and commitment to victory over Germany and Japan.

On April 19, 1997, in a 200-year old naval ritual called “coming alive,” the Navy formally commissioned its newest warship—a destroyer named for the five brothers. An old-fashioned spyglass—symbolic of deck command—was passed from Luke Miller, the last deck officer of an earlier USS The Sullivans, to the new ship’s petty officer.

The ceremony drew a crowd of some 4,000 to a cold Staten Island pier where the USS The Sullivans was officially declared on active duty. Fifty-five years earlier, the Juneau had sailed from the same harbor. Guests at the commissioning included the last two living Juneau survivors, Frank Holmgren and Lester Zook, both 74, and two grandchildren of Albert, the youngest of the Sullivan brothers.

The new USS The Sullivans is a high-tech Aegis-type, 8,500 ton guided missile destroyer, one of 32 being built. In today’s circumstances, it’s doubtful that it will ever issue its own covers.

Since the USS Juneau was a World War II ship, it had no Pre-War covers, and, since it did not survive the war, the particular ship had no Post-War covers [the cover shown at the left is from a later Juneau]. The last USS The Sullivans is represented by the cover at the right. All the same, when you see a Juneau cover or a cover from The Sullivans, the story of the Sullivan brothers should be remembered.

