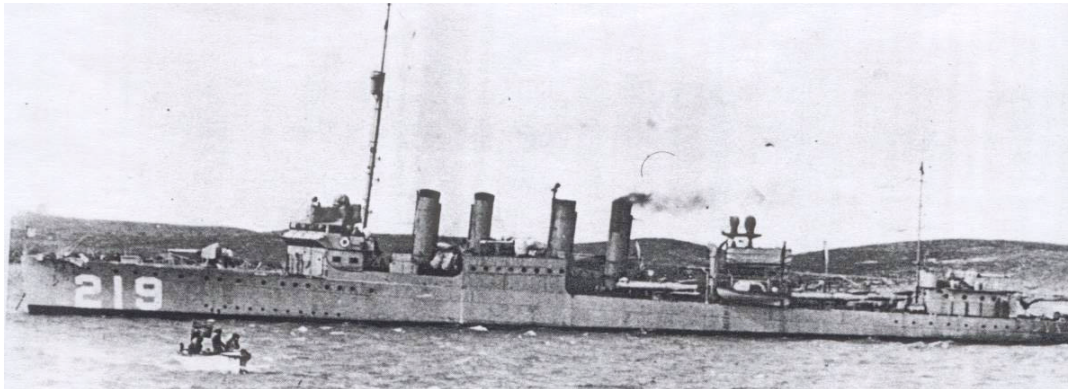


A SHIP TO REMEMBER: USS EDSALL (DD 219)

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U.S.S. EDSALL DD-219

The sinking of USS *Edsall* in 1942 is one of the most remarkable stories of seamanship and courage to come out of World War II. Little was known of the events surrounding her last engagement until 1980, when naval historians began to examine videos received from the Japanese.

This story's purpose is to honor the *Edsall's* American sailors who gave their lives that day and specifically for Henry Franklin Thaw, Electrician Mate First Class, who perished with the sinking of the *Edsall*. *Thaw was father* of co-author Dixie Geary and grandfather of co-author Kelley Long.

Prime author Lion Miles was the son of Lt. Lion Miles of the gunboat USS *Asheville* PG21 who perished three days later when the *Asheville* was sunk in battle. Miles is a noted Historian.

The *Edsall* was named after Norman Eckley Edsall born 3 June 1873 in Columbus, Ky., enlisted in the Navy 27 June 1898. While serving in *Philadelphia*, Seaman Edsall went ashore with a landing party on 1 April 1899 to suppress hostile natives near Apia, Samoa. He was killed attempting to carry his wounded commander to safety, and is buried on Samoa, in the same South Seas where the ship *Edsall* was to go down fighting a generation later. Seaman Edsall, the records say, "showed a spirit of bravery and self-sacrifice in keeping with the standard of the United States Navy." This could

stand as the epitaph for the USS *Edsall* DD219 as well.

Edsall was a four-stack flush-deck destroyer, designed in World War I but launched in 1920. Like other ships 80 ships of her class, she was not armored, having to rely on her speed and maneuverability for survival in combat. She could make 35 knots, as fast as the more modern destroyer's and cruisers of the Japanese Navy but she was badly outclassed in terms of armament, with only four 4-inch guns in her main battery.

Edsall joined the Asiatic Fleet in 1925, after distinguishing herself honorably in European waters, and spending the next fifteen years protecting American interests along the Chinese coast from Shanghai to Hong Kong. When Pearl Harbor was attacked, she was serving with Destroyer Division 57 at Balikpapan, Borneo. She immediately sailed to Singapore and searched for the survivors of HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse*, British capital ship sunk on December 10, 1941, by Japanese aircraft. Then she went to Java and acted as an escort for ships fleeing south to Australia before the advancing Japanese. On January 20, 1942, she participated in the first sinking of large Japanese submarine and was damaged by a depth charge, one of her own which exploded prematurely while she was making the submarine attack. She was leaking badly and dispatched to Tjilatjap for repairs.

Desperately short of combat aircraft, the American Navy dispatched the old aircraft carrier USS *Langley*, with 32 P-40 fighters, from Australia to Java. Destroyers *Edsall* and *Whipple* were ordered out of Tjilatjap and to rendezvous with the carrier and escort her to Tjilatjap, who then had made much preparatory work to receive, assemble and fly the new aircraft. But when they joined *Langley*, on February 27, Japanese bombers appeared overhead and attacked the old carrier. Their bombs set fire to the ship, and the crew were forced to abandon her, being rescued by the two destroyers. *Edsall* and *Whipple* picked up 485 men from the water and then sank the crippled *Langley* with gunfire and torpedoes.

Proceeding southwest to Christmas Island, the destroyers transferred the rescued sailors to the Navy oiler, USS *Pecos*. *Edsall* took on board 32 pilots and mechanics from *Whipple* and received orders to take them back north to Tjilatjap, pilots without planes! She departed Christmas Island on the morning of February 28, with about 185 officers and men. Her movements for the next day and a half are unknown. However, from the location of her sinking and the distances involved, it appears that she did not return to Java but sailed on a southerly course instead. On March 1 Japanese troops began landing on the northern coast of Java and the Navy ordered all American warships to rendezvous at a point to the south for further escape to Australia. Certainly *Edsall* received that order by radio.

Three days earlier, on February 25, Admiral Nagumo's Carrier Strike Force (carriers *Soryu* and *Akagi*) sortied from Staring Bay at Kendari, Celebes, and entered the Indian Ocean with the mission "to cut off any escape of the Allied Forces." Nagumo's Support Force consisted of the Third Battleship Division (battleship *Hiei* and *Kirishima*) and the Eighth Cruiser Division (heavy cruisers *Tone* and *Chikuma*). As fate would have it, destroyer *Edsall* had the misfortune to meet this formidable force on the afternoon of March 1, 1942.

At a position about 250 miles south-southeast of Christmas Island the cruiser *Tone* was the first to spot *Edsall* at a distance of 15 miles to the northwest. Twelve minutes later *Chikuma* sighted *Edsall* too, turned, and opened fire with her 8-inch guns at 1730. The range was extremely long at 21,000 meters (11 nautical miles) and all shots

missed. Immediately, *Edsall's* skipper, Lieutenant Joshua Nix of Memphis, Tennessee, laid down a smokescreen and began a series of evasive maneuvers that were to frustrate the Japanese for the next hour and a half.

At 1747 battleships *Hiei* and *Kirishima* opened fire with their main batteries of 14-inch guns and ordered all units to attack the American destroyer. They began firing at a range of 27,000 meters (14-1/2 nautical miles) and their shots also missed the target. At 1756 Lieutenant Nix courageously turned his ship directly toward *Chikuma* and closed the range so as to fire his 4-inch guns, but his shots fell short.

Chikuma stopped firing at 1800 when she entered a rain squall and *Edsall* laid down smoke. However, the intensive fire from all four Japanese ships resumed when the hapless American ship became visible again. Because they were shooting at such long ranges, Lieutenant Nix was able to observe the flash of the guns and turn his ship in time to avoid being hit. He did so approximately every minute. He also abruptly varied his speed from 30 knots to full stop and back again, while making turns as wide as 360- degrees. Since *Edsall* had suffered damage earlier off Java when one of her depth charges exploded too close astern, her performance had been reduced and there was no hope for her to outrun the enemy and try to escape. She could only stay on station and avoid destruction as long as possible.

Japanese naval gunnery was relatively poor during the early stages of the war, often wasteful and ineffective. The attack on *Edsall* was a prime example. The official history of Japan's navy states that some 1400 rounds were fired in the engagement but, until near the end of the battle, only one round found its mark. However, the action reports of *Tone* and *Chikuma* show that two direct hits (meichu) were made on *Edsall*, one by *Hiei* at 1824 and another by *Tone* at 1835. Still, this is an extremely bad percentage and much of it is to the credit of Lieutenant Nix's superb ship handling under the worst possible circumstances.

So frustrated were the Japanese commanders after an hour had passed that an order went out to the nearby Carrier Strike Force for the assistance of aircraft. Nine dive-bombers from *Soryu* and eight

from *Akagi* attacked *Edsall* from 1827 to 1850, even while she made smoke for the fourth time. The planes scored a number of hits with eight 550-pound bombs and nine 1100-pound bombs, setting *Edsall* on fire in what the Japanese called a raging conflagration (*kasai*). Whether because the destroyer was now out of control or Lieutenant Nix made a final courageous gesture of defiance, *Edsall* now turned directly toward her pursuers and came dead in the water. The battleships and cruisers pounded her relentlessly with their secondary batteries until she went down at 1900 in position 13-45S 106-45E, 430 miles south of Java.

Cruiser *Chikuma* picked up an undetermined number of survivors, possibly as many as five. Under interrogation they revealed the name of their ship, which appears in *Chikuma's* log as "Edosooru." They also explained to their captors how Lieutenant Nix was able to keep his ship afloat for so long a time while under heavy fire. They described how he changed course when he observed the flash of the Japanese guns, how he made turns up to 360 degrees, how he changed his speed from full to stop, and how he laid down smokescreens..

On this intelligence the Japanese recommended a number of changes to the gunnery curriculum at their Yokosuka Naval Base. To counter the possibility of an enemy ship evading shells at long range, they reduced the initial firing range to 12,000 meters for cruisers against destroyers and 17,000 meters for destroyers against destroyers. That required a correct identification of the type of target (*Tone* had thought *Edsall* was a light cruiser). Pincer attacks from different directions were to be used to reduce the enemy's chances for evasive maneuvering. And they introduced improved training and tactics for long-range firing to reduce the wastage of ammunition.

The *Edsall* survivors were taken to a POW camp on Celebes and nothing further was ever heard from them. After the war, the Army Graves Registration Service identified the remains of five sailors from the ship: F1 Sidney Amory, MM1 Horace Andrus, MM2 J.R. Cameron, MM3 Larry Vandiver, and F1 Donald Watters. Lieutenant Nix and his crew never received any official recognition for their heroic stand, which was in the finest tradition of the United States Navy. In my opinion, *Edsall's* skipper is deserving of the Navy Cross "for

extraordinary heroism, outstanding courage, gallantry in action and distinguished service in the line of his profession as commanding officer of USS *Edsall*." It is never too late to honor our heroes.

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See usshouston.org for a link to the website on the *Edsall's* skipper, Joshua Nix.