

IN MEMORY OF THE 176 LOST AT SEA ABOARD THE USS HOBSON DD-464/DMS-26 26 APRIL, 1952

This Memorial Day I want to tell you about a naval disaster shared to me by my father, John Henry Despino, Seaman, United States Navy, Ready Reserve. Mr. Johnny to his friends, Daddy to me. It was a fatal episode so horrific, so tragic that my Navy dad never allowed its painful recollection to surface the depths of his memory until one sunny afternoon at my parent's home in Dry Prong, Louisiana.

Shortly before Daddy succumbed to the dark, lonely, emptiness of Alzheimer's Disease, he decided maybe this was the time to talk about it, to open up before the event was lost to him, to us, forever. Perhaps he instinctively knew his memory was fading. Perhaps it was Father God letting us know he was involved in our lives even in the old days. Maybe it was Jesus who leaned on him to let go and somehow get healing in his heart from the devastations he witnesses as a young sailor. As my parents were aging, my siblings and I were there to help them, to make sure their later years were quality years, and that memorable day I was the one there, the one that Daddy chose as his listener.

We were in the kitchen making small talk, Daddy sitting in his favorite chair at the bar while I was checking out what food was on hand to cook us a nice supper. Mamma, another Johnnie in the family a/k/a Johnnie Ruth Despino, was sitting in her recliner watching TV. I do not recall the exact date. I was notoriously famous for not keeping a journal, for letting so many stories my elders decided were valuable enough to tell go in one ear and out the other. However, something in the way Daddy's voice lowered into almost hushed tones as he began talking caused me to quickly look at him. I remember seeing Daddy's face darken as if he were back there in the middle of the night just before shift change, memories rushing in and spilling out with rapid accuracy.

It was during the cold war when Daddy enlisted in the Navy, during the Korean Conflict. His most significant duty assignment was on a vessel called the USS VESOLE (DDR-878), a destroyer which worked along with other destroyers as minesweepers for aircraft carriers. Daddy worked as a projectile man, removing and replacing cartridges into the guns below deck. He said the noise from the firing was deafening and the cartridges were heavy to load, hot to remove, the smoke and smell of burned gun powder thick, making it hard to breathe. That fateful April, 1952, Daddy and other seamen were given a new assignment. This time it would not be the VESOLE he would board, but another craft - it would be the USS HOBSON.



USS VESOLE PHOTO BY PHOTOGRAPHER BELIEVED TAKEN IN VENICE

What happened to the Hobson during this assignment is a naval catastrophe that is stated to be the country's most infamous naval mistake, says journalist Kevin Manahan/NJ Advance Media for NJ.com. A destroyer, the USS Hobson DMS-26, along with another destroyer, the USS Rodman DD-456 were assigned as minesweepers for the USS Wasp CV-18. Uscarriers.net/cv18history says on April 26, 1952 the Wasp collided with destroyer minesweeper USS Hobson (DMS-26) while conducting night flying operations en route to Gibraltar. According to James Donahue, Korean War Educator, the WASP rescued 39 survivors and the Rodman rescued 22 survivors. Many accounts say the Hobson was steered into the Wasp by a skipper's human error, and was tossed and split in half. The ill fated ship sank within four minutes according to official records, as well as my Daddy's account.



USS HOBSON NAVAL HISTORICAL FOUNDATION/NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Daddy said at first he was assigned to serve on the Rodman for the upcoming mission, when suddenly he gets moved to the Hobson which did not have enough crew to operate it. The Navy placed his name on the Hobson roster list and the destroyer was preparing to sail off to fulfil its tour. The next thing anyone knew about the Hobson is that it sank in the Mediterranean and there were only 61 survivors. What happened next seemingly could only happen in the movies.

In the past I had heard my grandmother, Addie Calhoun, my "Mawmaw," and Mamma talking about how the US Government had called Mawmaw and told her to have Mamma there at her house on a certain day and at a certain time, that they had news to tell them - together. Mawmaw and Mamma were there anxious and scared when the call came in. They were informed Daddy was considered "lost at sea." Their worlds came crashing in as they were advised someone would get back with them when there were final findings. What they found was their many prayers and tears had been answered before they had begun.

Daddy said that at the last minute some superior officers came on the doomed destroyer and notified the Rodman sailors too many crew members had gone over, that there was a re-transfer of a few men, and Daddy was miraculously in that number. All three ships embarked towards the Mediterranean and Daddy began his duties as usual, never knowing they were quickly sailing toward the unusual.

April 26, 1952, a couple hours before his midnight shift change, Daddy had gone up on the main deck to breathe the night air and exchange pleasantries with other crew members on his ship and those on the neighboring Hobson. He said he commonly saw the crew members getting off their shifts and going down to sleep while the new members would be moving in their places. These images seeming simple would turn into sore grief as Daddy's heart was swept along downward with the tides and turns of the USS Hobson.

It is not clear if Daddy had any premonition of danger, saw the sailing too close to the Wasp, or when Hobson turned directly into the bow of that giant of a ship. The smaller destroyer was no match for it. Daddy said the sounds were horrible, that he would never forget the ship being cut in two, sinking so quickly, and oh the wails and pleas of the few survivors, crying out for help, or the deafening silence of the watery graves.

Daddy got quiet and I could tell spilling his story too long held in of miracles, destruction, death, and survival gave him some peace. As I listened, I couldn't help wonder how many lives were touched by this one instance, some by miracles, some by grief, and my goodness, how I would not be here had it not been for God's divine intervention. I pray we never forget the survivors of the Hobson, and its souls lost at sea.

By Gale Despino-McGlothlin 5/26/2025