



WOMPATUCK NEWS

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J.B. Mills provided this photo of black sailors at attention at the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot in 1943. The Hingham Shipyard is in background. Most of the sailors who died on the USS YF-415 are in this Navy muster. Mills is pictured on far left.

J.B. Mills Donates Monument for Fallen Friends

By Jim Rose, FOW News Editor and Historian



Seabee veteran J.B. Mills of Whitman paid over \$3,000 of his own money for an etched granite stone memorializing the USS YF-415 crew that perished on May 11, 1944.

The ship was disposing obsolete ammunition from the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot 14 miles off Boston Harbor when signal rockets caught fire. Violent explosions sent the ship to the bottom, killing 17 of the 31 crewmembers. Eleven of these men were Afro-Americans from the ammunition depot.

The weather ship USS Zircon rescued 14 survivors: four crewmembers of whom one died of burns and ten members of the Hingham ordnance battalion.

"I knew all the crew from the Depot detail," Mills recalls sadly. "They were all my black brothers. In fact, I was very good friends with Adell Braxton and Freddie Edwards. I volunteered to go on that ship that day but Commander Doe

luckily assigned me to administrative duty. I still miss them today. I'm 87 now and thought it would be a fitting gesture to put up this monument before I go."

A dedication will take place at Bare Cove Park on May 12 at 2:00 pm to commemorate the tragedy.

Dr. Barbara Henry of New York, niece of Raymond Henry who died on the ship, plans on being there to pay her respects. Survivor Edward Sumpter of Kentucky also may attend. The flyer for the event can be found on page two.

J.B. Mills has provided the park with a wealth of information over the years. Most notably the many black jazz musicians that passed through the ammunition depot from time to time, especially saxophonist John Coltrane and slide trombone player Al Grey. Coltrane was inducted into the Downbeat Hall of Fame and Grey performed at the White House with Winton Marsalis.

Besides Coltrane and Grey, famed trombonist Slide Hampton's saxophone-playing brother, "Hamp" Hampton, was

also stationed at the ammunition depot.

In addition to musicians, Mills also shared his feelings on race relations in the military during World War II. "The thing that gets my goat is us black sailors were classified as "stewards" before 1942, not seamen. They were given all the menial and dangerous jobs like cooks, stewards, truck drivers and ammunition handlers. Thanks to FDR's wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, she changed all that. We are all seamen now.

"Besides the USS YF-415 sinking, the Port Chicago California disaster in 1944 was the biggest tragedy black servicemen ever suffered. More than 300 people died in that explosion and most were blacks. Those who refused to go back to work because of the unsafe conditions were sent to prison. They were all black."

Mills is a combat veteran of the Battle of Okinawa, one of the bloodiest engagements of World War II. He was stationed at the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot from 1943 to 1945. ■

May 12 event flyer on page 2



USS YF-415 pictured before it exploded outside Boston Harbor in 1944 killing 17 sailors.



Black sailors at Depot in 1943. Most of the sailors who perished were present here. Mills is on far left.

In Honor of the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot Sailors Killed on the USS YF-415

Today we are remembering the Seamen and Gunnersmates of the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot who lost their lives disposing ammunition on May 11, 1944.

The USS YF-415 was conducting a routine dump of obsolete ammunition in a trench 14 miles off Boston Harbor when signal rockets accidentally caught fire and set off three-inch and five-inch shells and other pyrotechnics in a rapid series of detonations.

At no time did “abandon ship” or the emergency signal sound. Men jumped overboard to save their lives. There was no time to don life preservers or rafts. The survivors clung to debris in 50-degree water as the 132-foot ship slipped under from the violent explosions and consuming fire.

The weather ship USS Zircon rescued 14 survivors: four crewmembers of whom one succumbed to burns and ten members of the Hingham work detail. The missing 16 men were never found. Eleven of these men were Afro-Americans of the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot. A total of 17 men died out of a crew of 31.

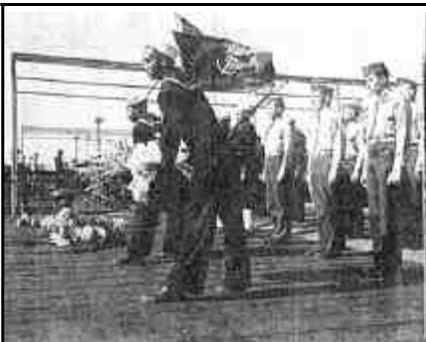
The wreck of the USS YF-415 was first discovered by divers in 2002. In 2004, the late Senator Ted Kennedy paid tribute to the victims of the USS YF-415 on the 60th anniversary of the sinking at the dedication of the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Today the ship rests at a depth of 240 feet with the bridge and other superstructures torn off by fishing nets over the years. Its bow is firmly mired in sediment while its lost sailors are on “eternal patrol.”

Special thanks are owed to Navy veteran J.B. Mills for his donation of the monument, photos, and World War II service. Mills initially volunteered for USS YF-415 duty that ill-fated day but was assigned to an administrative post with Depot Commander Harry Doe instead. He was friends with the entire crew of the Hingham ordnance detail.

The names of the deceased recognized for their sacrifice are:

Adell Braxton, Raymond N. Carr, Truman S. Chittick, George M. Cook, James Cox, Jr., Freddie Edwards, Jr., James S. Griffin, Charles R. Harris, Raymond L. Henry, Julian Jackson, and James B. Turner.



J.B Mills performed funeral duty for his fallen sailors at the Depot.



J.B Mills as he appeared during World War II.



J.B Mills as he looks today.