

Dennis Howard Bennett

U.S. Navy, Sailor Second Class

1921 - 1943

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Dennis Howard Bennett was born in 1921 on West Virginia Day—June 20—in Philippi, West Virginia. Twenty years later, with World War II raging in Europe and the United States teetering on the edge of neutrality, he joined the U.S. Navy two months before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. This decision would put Bennett aboard the destroyer *USS Sims* (DD-409) on the fateful day of its destruction during the Battle of the Coral Sea in 1942.

According to the 1930 census, Dennis spent his early life in the small town of Philippi with his parents and five siblings. When he was about 18, his family relocated to Weston in nearby Lewis County. His father Columbus worked as a mine foreman in Weston for the Pardee and Curtin Mine Company, while his mother Lulu ran the household. The couple were kept busy raising Dennis and his brothers Richard, Woodrow, Quintin, and Van Louis, along with their sister Luvada, in the throes of the Great Depression. Dennis's grandmother may also have lived with the family during this difficult time.

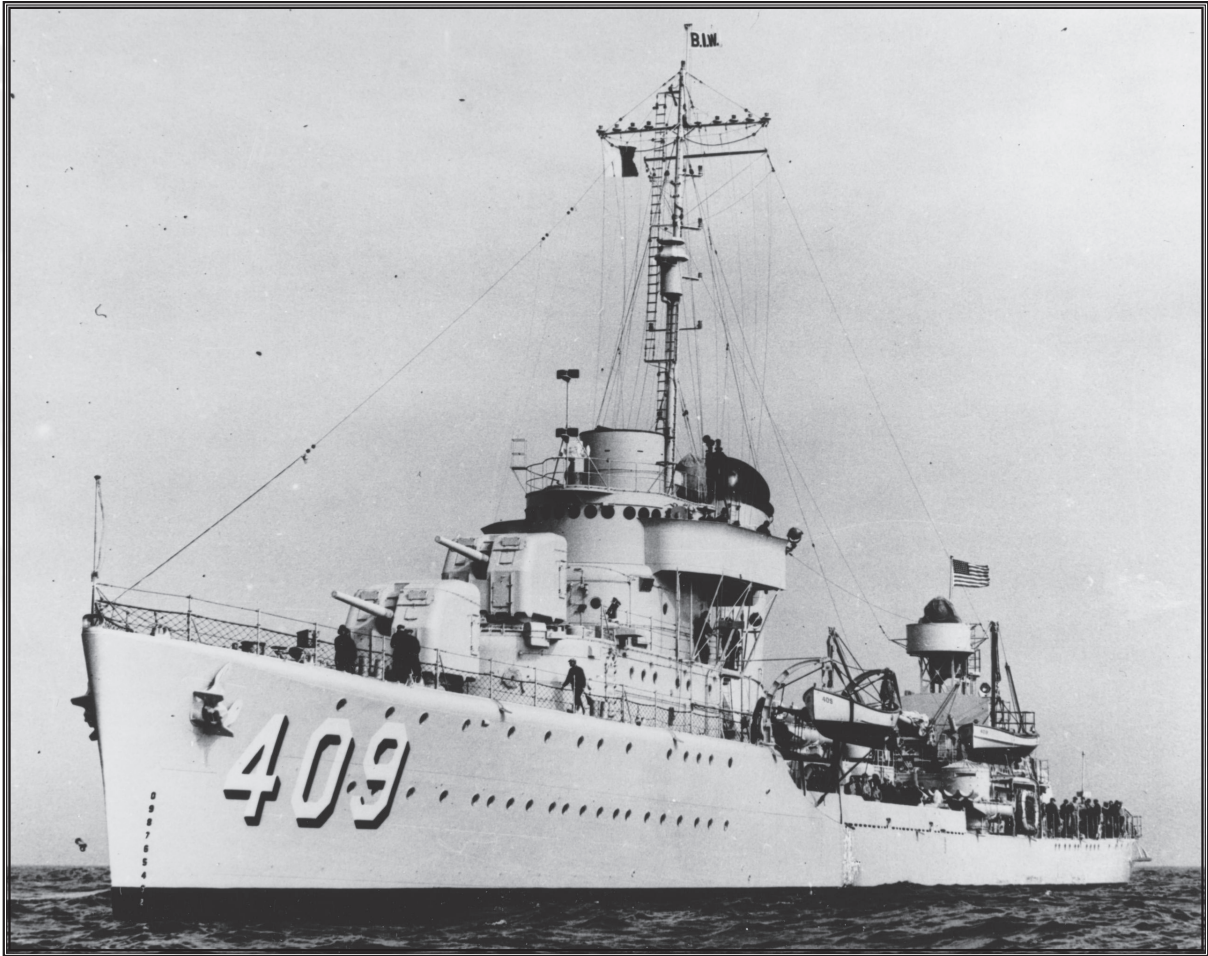


Dennis Bennett as a young man, prior to joining the Navy. Honorstates.org

Dennis did not complete any schooling above the seventh grade. This lack of education, coupled with the scarcity of employment opportunities during the Depression, may have been why Bennett took a job at the Pardee and Curtin Mine Company where his father was a foreman. Both Bennetts worked at Bergoo Mine No. 4, located sixty miles away from Weston in Webster Springs. The 1940 census lists Dennis as a “new worker” at the mine. He stayed less than two years, enlisting in the Navy on October 5, 1941.

On May 7, 1942, exactly six months to the day after the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into World War II, Seaman Second Class Dennis Bennett found himself aboard the destroyer *USS Sims* as part of Admiral Frank J. Fletcher's Task Force 17. While Fletcher's flotilla prepared to repel an impending Japanese invasion of New Guinea, the *Sims* was escorting a fleet oiler, *USS Neosho* (AO-23) through the Coral Sea.

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USS Sims (DD-409) during her builder's trials in July 1939. Of her crew of over 200 officers and men, only a handful survived the ship's destruction during the Battle of the Coral Sea. NavSource

The two American ships were spotted by patrol planes operating from Japanese Admiral Takeo Takagi's aircraft carriers. *Neosho* was herself mistaken for an aircraft carrier, and the *Sims* for a cruiser. Assuming these relatively insignificant vessels were critical targets, Admiral Takagi immediately ordered an all-out attack on the two ships, which were isolated in the waters of the Coral Sea near the coast of Australia.

The oiler and its escort soon faced an onslaught of Japanese planes. *Sims* was the first to take fire. Before long, the destroyer was struck by a kamikaze pilot, sustaining heavy damage. Her crew kept the embattled ship afloat, but when she was hit by three 550-pound bombs, she began to go down. The last bomb actually lifted what was left of the ship into the air before sending the shattered remains to the bottom of the ocean. Only thirteen survivors were picked up. Dennis Bennett was not among them.

The *Neosho*, also badly mauled by Japanese dive bombers, managed to stay afloat for several days until her survivors were picked up by other American vessels. The damaged oiler was scuttled by an American destroyer on May 11. *Neosho* and *Sims* were casualties of what later became known as the

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Battle of the Coral Sea—the first naval engagement in history where ships of the opposing fleets never saw each other, but instead fought it out entirely with airplanes.

Most of the crew of the *Sims*, including Bennett, were originally pronounced Missing In Action (MIA) or Lost At Sea (LAS) At the time, the Navy had a policy of keeping sailors listed as MIA for one year and one day before they could be declared Killed In Action, which is why Bennett's official date of death is listed exactly a year and a day after the sinking of the *Sims*.

Dennis was a mere twenty years old when his ship was destroyed. Little is known about the six brief months he worked for the Navy prior to the battle, but the brave legacy of the *Sims* ensures that this young man earned his place in history.

Although his remains and those of his shipmates were never recovered, memorials are dedicated to their honor on the Tablets of the Missing at the Manila American Cemetery and Memorial in the Philippines. A memorial to *USS Sims* was also erected in Cardwell, Australia, in gratitude for her crew's sacrifice. The Barbour County War Memorial in Bennett's hometown of Philippi also lists his name. A marker was dedicated on May 8, 1990, for Dennis Bennett in the West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown, Taylor County, so he can be honored and remembered in the state whose birthday he shared: the state he called home.



***USS Neosho* (AO-23, background right) escapes Pearl Harbor during the attack on December 7, 1941. The badly damaged battleship *USS California* (BB-44) is pictured at center. NavSource**

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Sources

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Resting Place

West Virginia National Cemetery
42 Veterans Memorial Lane, Grafton, WV 26354
(304) 265-2044

Section MA
Site 45

Date of interment: May 8, 1990

About the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Program of the Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in or near Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's earliest National Cemeteries, the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. When the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton in the community of Pruntytown. The same National Cemetery Administration staff cares for both facilities.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, and Grafton High School.

Please refer comments or questions to the West Virginia Humanities Council
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