

MICHAL PIOTROWSKI

SHIPFITTER ^{THIRD CLASS}
U.S. NAVY

WORLD WAR II
1918 - 1948

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USS *Helm* (DD-388) docked at Mare Island, California on February 25, 1942—the day of Piotrowski’s first desertion.
Naval History and Heritage Command

Michal Piotrowski was born on December 6, 1918, in Allentown, Pennsylvania, to Alex Costanovich and Anna Eva Piotrowski. Both his parents and his oldest sister Josephine were born in Poland and immigrated to America in 1913. The three Piotrowskis first settled in Maine, where two more sisters were born—Kustante (1915) and Anna (1918). Eventually, they moved to Allentown after a brief period in Chester, Pennsylvania.

While in Chester, Alex had to register for the draft in 1918—though he had only been in the United States for five years. At the time, he was working as a reamer for the Sun Ship Company, a player in the Philadelphia shipbuilding industry, where he drilled, reamed, and countersunk holes on vessels under construction. World War I lasted only two more months after he signed his

draft card. Alex was never called into service, and Michal was born at the end of that year.

Less than two years later, the shipyards were hundreds of miles in the past. The family was living in the steel and mining city of Allentown. But something had happened in 1919. Rather than finding employment as a coal miner, which is probably what Alex was seeking, by the time of the 1920 census he was listed as an out-of-work “cripple.” How this came to pass is unclear, as chronic misspellings of all the Piotrowski family members’ names in official documents throughout their lives (including military and vital records) make them difficult to track. So, with four young children, all of them too young to work, the Piotrowskis took in three boarders to supplement their income—all immigrants from Russia and Slovakia.

The rented home on Sycamore Street was situated in a neighborhood of Eastern Europeans: Poles, Slovaks, Hungarians, Russians, and Ukrainians, mixed with Irish immigrants and some native-born Pennsylvanians. The mid-1910s had witnessed a substantial rise in Polish immigration, with nearly 600,000 Poles fleeing to the U.S. to escape various forms of repression in the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires. Land shortages and chronic unemployment, plus mandatory Russian military service in parts of Poland controlled by the czar, compelled many Polish people to give up their native land. Finding places to settle together in the United States helped them to adapt and support each other. Even after seven years in the country, none of the Piotrowskis could read and write English.

Whatever befell Alex in 1919, it claimed his life. He passed away within the decade before turning 50, and Anna quickly remarried. Young Michal barely knew his birth father, instead growing up under the wing of his stepfather, Samuel Patrick. This was probably the anglicized spelling of Samuel Paduk, a Russian immigrant—and one of the Piotrowskis’ former boarders from 1920. The family moved to Peytona, an unincorporated community on the banks of the Big Coal River in Boone County, West Virginia, where steelworker Sam Patrick became a coal miner instead. Anna’s children took the surname “Patrick” for several years during their childhood, though Michal later reverted to Piotrowski.

The Great Depression dominated Michal’s teenage years, making a hard life in the hills even more trying. Of the local grade schools and one-room schools the Piotrowski children might have attended, all but one had well under 100 pupils. Michal likely attended Sherman High School in Seth, which was built in 1924 to accommodate the children of local miners. The Piotrowski children would have had to travel about seven miles each way to get to the high school of around 500 students.

Michal enlisted in the U.S. Navy right after high school, marching into the Charleston, West Virginia, recruiting office at the age of 18 on June 10, 1937. The Navy offered steady pay and better career prospects than rural Boone County, where coal mining was the predominant occupation. The year 1937 brought another dip in the American economy following what seemed like an upward trend out of the Great Depression. This may have made the life of a sailor even more attractive to Michal.

After training in Norfolk, Virginia, and elsewhere, Seaman First Class Michal Piotrowski made his home aboard the destroyer USS *Helm* (DD-388) for the better part of five years. He was part of the distinguished destroyer’s original crew, having been aboard from her commissioning. Seamen fulfilled general duties such as cleaning, firefighting, deck watches, gunnery, and many other tasks aboard the ship. In the prewar Navy there was little action to be had beyond training exercises, but the *Helm* did introduce Michal to a much larger world on assigned cruises and patrols up and down the Atlantic seaboard, the Caribbean, and eventually the Pacific.

In fact, Michal’s tour of duty aboard the *Helm* was almost at an end by the time he celebrated his 23rd birthday on December 6, 1941. After almost five years in the Navy, perhaps he was considering a change of course. At least his birthday would be followed by an easy Sunday’s work “de-perming” the ship (demagnetizing the hull to reduce its vulnerability to mines) in Pearl Harbor’s West Loch Channel. Sailors who had been given leave ashore trickled back to the *Helm* by 7:00 a.m., and 30 minutes later half the crew was sent to breakfast as the destroyer set out for West Loch.

“It was a typically beautiful sunny Hawaiian morning” on December 7, recalled *Helm*’s new gunnery officer, Victor Dybdal. One of the lookouts spotted a distant plane diving toward the airfield on Ford Island, not an unusual practice for American pilots. Then came another plane, and another. And an airplane hangar on Ford Island suddenly burst into flames.

The *Helm* crew realized this wasn’t a drill when a Japanese fighter zipped by, strafing with its machine guns. General quarters sounded at 7:59 a.m. Michal Piotrowski and his comrades rushed to battle stations. Ammunition and firing mechanisms for the ship’s guns were still locked up, and the locks had to be broken with the closest tools at hand. As an ordinary seaman, Michal would have been on deck if he wasn’t part of a 5-inch gun crew. Perhaps he was tensely waiting, steel helmet on his head and binoculars in hand as a lookout or gripping a trigger as ammunition was rushed to his .50-caliber machine gun.

The gun crews brought down an enemy plane at 8:10 a.m., then spotted a

Japanese midget sub. Shots fired at the sub missed, but it was forced to dive. A torpedo passed under *Helm's* stern a minute later. While the lookouts strained to spot the sub again, a Japanese bomber dropped two 100-pound bombs dangerously close, one just 20 yards away. The explosions bent the destroyer's armor plating and opened seams in the hull, but no one was hurt, and the damage was not serious.

As the buzz of Japanese aircraft faded into the distance later that morning, *Helm* sailed through Pearl Harbor and the crew beheld the awful sight of the U.S. Pacific Fleet burning at anchor. Screams, shouts, sirens, engines, secondary explosions, and oily black smoke greeted the gaze of the unscathed destroyer men. Several of their sister destroyers were utterly demolished in their docks. Like many of his comrades, Michal probably took all of this in with a mixture of shock, despair, and rage.

The end of his enlistment wasn't for three more months, so Michal accompanied *Helm* in escorting the carrier USS *Saratoga* (CV-3) in an aborted attempt to relieve Wake Island, which fell to the Japanese before they arrived. As they were returning to Pearl Harbor, *Saratoga* was hit by a Japanese submarine's torpedo, though she survived to fight another day. After several more minor operations in January 1942, the *Helm* returned to Mare Island in San Francisco Bay to refit for more fighting in the Pacific. On February 22, at Mare Island, Michal's first enlistment ended. He re-enlisted the very next day on board the ship, evidently ready to fight.

Events, however, unfolded differently. When the *Helm* left Mare Island for "dangerous waters" on February 25, Michal Piotrowski was not aboard. He had disappeared.

In wartime, sailors are under strict orders to be aboard ship before departure, or they are immediately designated as deserters. This can sometimes be reduced to a charge of Absent Without Leave (AOL or AWOL), avoiding a court martial, if they are able to rendezvous with their vessel quickly enough. No such redemption is possible if the ship sails for the theater of operations thousands of miles away. Such was the case for Michal Piotrowski.

His whereabouts for about six days in the immediate aftermath of the desertion, and where he reported back to the Navy—or was picked up by police or a shore patrol—are indeterminate. But by July 2, 1942, he stood before a court martial in San Diego, where he pled guilty to AOL charges. Based on his previously spotless record, the seven members of the court recommended clemency. He was reduced to the lowly rank of apprentice seaman and placed in six months confinement. Michal may have been lucky there was a war going on, as experienced sailors were valuable commodities. In peacetime, he might have been expelled from the Navy immediately.

In fact, Michal's luck improved. On August 8, the acting Secretary of the Navy put the entire sentence on hold in exchange for a six-month probationary period. Still holding onto his seaman first class rank, Piotrowski reported



USS *Waller* transfers supplies from a barge near New York harbor on October 22, 1942. Piotrowski had been aboard for three weeks. NARA

aboard the destroyer USS *Waller* (DD-466) at the New York Navy Yard on October 1, 1942, the day of her commissioning. An experienced seaman like Michal would have been a helpful addition to the crew during those first two months, as they equipped, drilled, and shook down the ship.

Events then took another bad turn. When the *Waller* departed for duty on December 5, 1942, Michal Piotrowski was again missing from the crew. He was declared a deserter for the second time. When he reappeared at the Norfolk naval base later that month, judgment was swift. On January 26, 1943, the acting Secretary of the Navy voided his probation and reinstated his six-month confinement, to be served at the Norfolk base. After doing his time, probably spent performing menial duties, Michal was ejected from the Navy with a Bad Conduct Discharge.

The summer of 1944 found Piotrowski working at the Ohio Steel Foundry in Lima, Ohio, where he helped weld and burn components for ships. On October 28, 1944, however, he was re-inducted at the Navy recruiting station in Huntington, West Virginia. Whether he volunteered for induction with his local draft board, or was simply drafted as manpower needs surged following the Allied invasion of Europe is unclear.

The Navy, for its part, appears to have treated his reappearance as a fresh start. He went through a new training course at the Naval Training Center, Great Lakes, Illinois (with thousands of inexperienced new sailors) and emerged as a seaman second class. By December 28, 1944, he was at the huge personnel distribution center at Camp Shoemaker in Dublin, California, waiting for an assignment. It didn't take long. On January 10, he reported aboard the *Essex*-class aircraft carrier USS *Bunker Hill* (CV-17). He was a destroyer man no more.

MICHAL PIOTROWSKI

The *Bunker Hill* had just returned to refit and rotate crews after a long year of momentous fighting in the Philippines, Mariana Islands, and elsewhere. The massive flattop was the flagship of Admiral Marc A. Mitscher, commander of the Pacific Fleet's carrier strike force. Michal's time on the *Bunker Hill* was a busy one. The ship would soon be involved in several of the largest operations of the war. From February 15 to March 4, 1945, the ship played a supporting role in the Battle of Iwo Jima and in raids against Honshu Island and the Nansei Islands. On April 7, 1945, aircraft from the *Bunker Hill* spotted and sank the Japanese battleship *Yamato*, one of the most heavily armed battleships ever constructed.

In May 1945, the *Bunker Hill* was supporting the amphibious invasion of Okinawa, the last major island campaign of the war. The crew had weathered over a month of heavy fighting and nonstop action, sending its air patrols and sorties out daily while sidestepping suicide attacks by Japanese kamikazes. As morning dawned on May 11, however, cloud cover was thick and low, and the *Bunker Hill's* luck ran out.

Two kamikaze planes carrying bombs suddenly emerged from the concealing clouds and dove straight at the carrier. *Bunker Hill's* crew had only seconds to react, and the ship's anti-aircraft guns were unable to shoot down the Japanese pilots. The first kamikaze struck the flight deck on the starboard side, destroying planes parked there filled with fuel and ammunition which began to burn with intensity. Then the second Japanese plane dove toward the ship

USS *Bunker Hill* at her launching on December 7, 1942, exactly one year after Piotrowski's first taste of combat at Pearl Harbor. NHHC



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Smoke pours from the crippled USS *Bunker Hill*, the result of two kamikaze hits that killed many of Piotrowski's crewmates. NARA

and dropped a 550-pound bomb before crashing into the deck. The bomb penetrated to the pilots' room of the ship, killing 22 members of the *Bunker Hill's* fighter squadron, VF-84.

A massive explosion rocked the vessel. Aviation fuel went up in flames, engulfing the flattop. A huge hole burrowed down several decks and burning fuel dripped down, filling corridors with smoke and suffocating sailors to death in minutes. Michal, caught belowdecks as well, threw himself up a flaming ladder to escape and made it up to the flight deck where he took up a fire hose. On his own initiative, he battled the fires that sprung from the exploding aircraft "despite the fact that gasoline from the planes might have killed him instantly."

The *Bunker Hill* reported 396 sailors and airmen killed, 264 wounded, and 43 missing. It was the deadliest single kamikaze attack of the war. It might have been worse if not for the courageous and quick-thinking action of sailors like Michal Piotrowski. This action earned him a personal commendation medal from Admiral Mitscher for "Courageous performance of duty in putting out fire aboard the ship." For his part, Michael wrote home that he was "lucky to be alive" and was looking forward to a month's leave at home in West Virginia following a stateside reprieve in Seattle, where the *Bunker Hill* limped home for repairs. Somewhere along the way, Michal received a final promotion to shipfitter third class, probably for extensive emergency repair work he performed on the shattered *Bunker Hill*.



This photograph of a wrecked elevator on the Bunker Hill provides gruesome insight into the extent of the damage. Note the destroyed plane at bottom right. NARA

Michal Piotrowski's war, with all its ups and downs, was over. He was discharged in October 1945 and reunited with his family in Fayette County, where they now lived. Local papers appear to have given him a hero's welcome, with no reference to any of his naval service prior to the *Bunker Hill*. On November 2, 1946, he married Shirley Jean Sturms from Grafton, West Virginia. They eventually moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where Michal again found work in the shipbuilding industry as a millwright.

Later that year, however, Michal was diagnosed with lymphoma. World War II navy ships used plenty of asbestos to protect against fire, which may have contributed to his illness, but the most likely culprit was the noxious gasoline fumes and other damaging smoke from that brutal day fighting fires on the *Bunker Hill*. Michal was hospitalized on December 30, 1947, at the Marine Hospital in Baltimore. He died 64 days later on March 5, 1948, at the age of 29. Michal Piotrowski was buried in Grafton National Cemetery in the state both he and his wife called home.

While Michal lay ill in the hospital, his son Michael Terry was born. Shirley and the baby returned to Grafton to stay with her parents and brother for a time. She died in Anaheim, California, in 2004, never having remarried. Shirley was also buried in Grafton National Cemetery, side by side with Michal, among the rows of the honored dead.

Shirley Sturms Piotrowski's 1942 Grafton High School portrait, and her marker in Grafton National Cemetery. Ancestry



SOURCES

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Full bibliographies will be included in the final draft of each biography, available later in the summer of 2024.

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Grant Program of the U.S. 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 Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's first National Cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—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. Since 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.

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, Grafton High School, and University High School.

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