RALPH JUNIOR SETLER

WATER TENDER THIRD CLASS
U.S. NAVY

WORLD WAR II
1923 - 1944

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Ralph Setler in uniform. *Courtesy of Debra Setler*

Ralph Junior Setler was born February 18, 1923, to James Edward Setler and Vernie Clare Setler. The Setler family had five children: James, Dorothy, Richard, Ralph, and Robert. The family lived in Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia. The growth of railroads and coal mining in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and even tourism—spurred by the growing awareness of Grafton as the birthplace of Mother's Day in 1907—contributed to Grafton's bustling economy. The Setlers, however, were a working-class family that would have been far from immune to the difficulties of the Great Depression during the 1930s.

The family lived on St. Charles Street in Grafton, a mere six blocks long, perched on a steep hillside within four short blocks of Main Street and downtown businesses of the day. This made it easy for Ralph's father, James, to walk to work as a sectional stockman for a railroad storeroom. By 1940, the family had eight members living in the household, including Ralph's grandmother and niece. Ralph was the third of four boys living with a father, mother, grandmother, and granddaughter, making for a crowded home that kept Ralph's mother, Vernie, focused on keeping the house in order. Vernie's domestic labor was imperative to the family's economic and physical well-being.

Records indicate that Ralph attended school through his junior year at Grafton High, but there is no indication of him making it through graduation. After leaving high school, Ralph was employed by the City of Grafton and by December of 1942 enlisted in the U.S. Navy. America had been attacked by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor just one year earlier and was engaged in a fierce battle to halt Japanese expansion in the Pacific as World War II raged across the globe. The bombing of Pearl Harbor led a great number of young men to feel the need to join up and defend their country, and Setler appears to have jumped at the chance when he reached the minimum age for military service.

Ralph began service as a fireman 2nd class (F2C). In this role, he was responsible for the ship's boilers and maintaining the fire room equipment, as well as helping to operate the boat's engines, all of which required long hours in the loud, hot bowels of a warship. Broadly speaking, the enlisted crewmen of a U.S. Navy ship during World War II were divided into two general categories: fireman and seaman. Firemen usually served belowdecks on the systems that kept the ship powered and in motion, whereas seamen tended to topside tasks such as gunnery, keeping watch, and more. Early assignment as a fireman or seaman generally dictated the path of a sailor's advancement through the ranks over time.

Setler was later promoted to the rank of water tender 3rd class (WT3C), which was his position for the remainder of his service. This more technically advanced rating required specialized knowledge, putting him on track for a petty officer's rank in due time. While the role of a water tender was similar to that of a basic fireman, its attainment showed that Ralph Setler was gaining more competence keeping the ship's engines in fighting trim.

Ralph was assigned to the cruiser USS *Reno* (CL-96) at the time of its commissioning on December 28, 1943, and remained with it until his death. The *Reno* entered service in the midst of a war that was rapidly redefining the role of the "cruiser" in fleet operations. Once considered the backbone of surface combat fleets, cruisers had been envisioned as the bridge between battleships and destroyers: heavily armed with large-caliber guns, but more lightly armored and maneuverable than the massive "battlewagons." *Reno* was one of eight *Atlanta*-class light cruisers in the U.S. Navy, the only cruisers ever built with torpedo tubes. Initially meant to serve as fast scouts, *Reno* and three of her *Atlanta*-class sisters (nicknamed the *Oakland*-class) were soon re-envisioned as floating antiaircraft batteries to help protect the growing number of aircraft carriers in the Pacific Fleet.

Setler and the crew of the *Reno* had only a few months of getting to know their ship before being sent straight into action, accompanying Admiral Marc A. Mitscher's Task Force 58 (also designated Task Force 38, depending on the operation) into battle at Marcus Island and Wake Island in May 1944. Mitscher commanded the vital aircraft carrier strike force, the Pacific Fleet's most powerful asset. After these smaller May operations, which were likely good "warm-ups" for the *Reno*'s crew, the fleet's full might was assembled for an invasion of the Mariana Islands chain—15 carriers, seven battleships, 11 cruisers, 86 destroyers and over 900 planes—to seize Saipan, Tinian, Guam, and the Palau Islands. These were to serve as important airbases for B-29 bomber strikes against the Japanese home islands.

June and July 1944 witnessed a period of almost constant action for the *Reno*, which crisscrossed the Philippine Sea to assist in landings, diversions, feints, and other operations in the Marianas, Volcano, Bonin, and Philippine islands. On June 19-20, the Japanese fleet finally counterattacked in a bid to save its garrison on Saipan. Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, however, commanding the Third Fleet, had anticipated the move. During the ensuing Battle of the Philippine Sea, naval aviators from Mitscher's carriers decimated incoming waves of Japanese planes in what became known as "The Great Marianas Turkey Shoot."

In two days of fighting, the Japanese lost over 500 aircraft. American pilots were so effective that antiaircraft escorts like the *Reno* had little to contribute: *Reno* only shot down a single enemy plane, a torpedo bomber, with her 5-inch guns. The ship's war diary states that "automatic weapons did not fire," indicating that Japanese aircraft never got close enough for *Reno*'s 40mm and 20mm gun crews to join the fight. Down in the engine and boiler rooms, however, Setler and his comrades would have been on their toes responding to changes in speed and direction—especially when approaching to rescue a downed American aircrew on the night of June 20.

By October 12-14, 1944, the ship was with the fleet in Leyte Gulf, supporting the full-scale invasion of the Philippines. Making up for the lack of opportunities in the Marianas, *Reno* shot down six enemy planes in this brief period, one of which clipped the stern of the ship and inflicted light damage. Soon, however, a much larger clash of navies was to take place that would involve over 200,000 men.

The Battle of Leyte Gulf descended on the *Reno* and her task force in the form of more Japanese planes on October 24. *Reno* shot down two planes at close range with her automatic weapons, but in spite of the escort ships'

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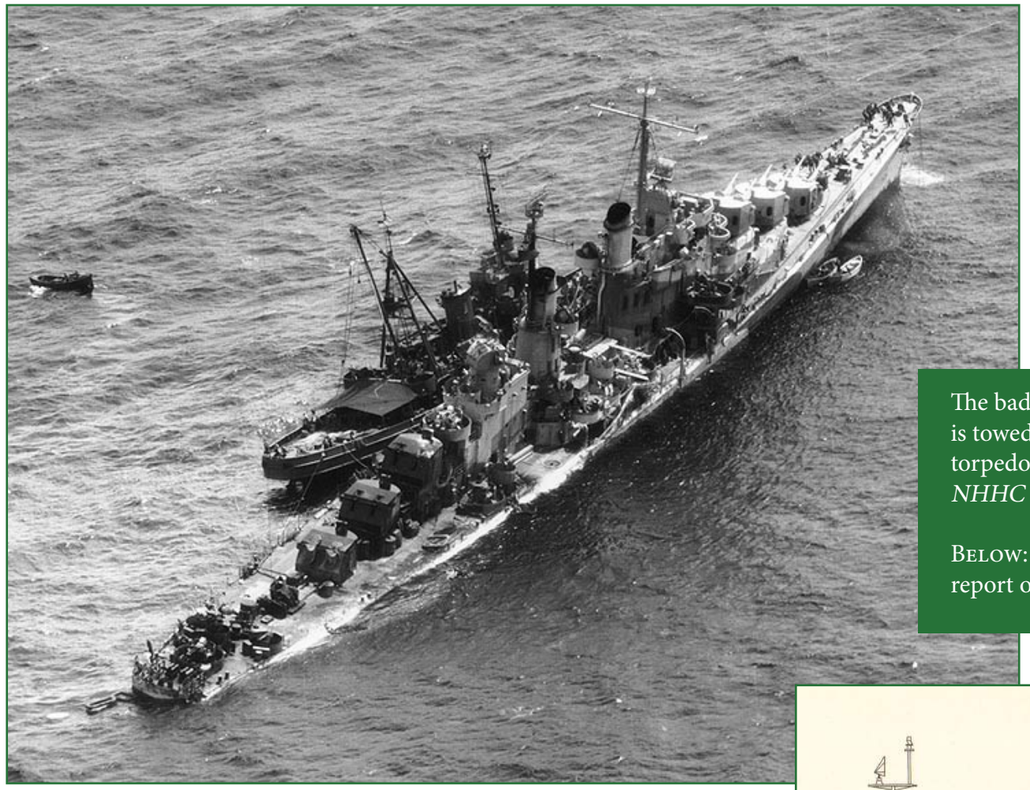
protective fire, several Japanese bombs hit the nearby carrier USS *Princeton* (CV-37). Secondary explosions wracked the battered flattop, and several escort ships, including *Reno*, closed in to assist. *Reno* was alongside *Princeton* when the carrier's deck dipped in a swell, smashing into *Reno* and destroying one of her 40mm gun mounts. *Reno* nevertheless continued rescuing survivors from the water, and soon was ordered to scuttle the stricken carrier, which she accomplished with two torpedoes. These hours of delicate maneuvering would have been particularly harrowing for Setler's engine crew, making constant adjustments to the ship's powerful engines as guns hammered overhead.

While the battle still raged on land and sea through the end of October, *Reno* was rarely again in immediate danger. The Japanese fleet was crushed by American carrier planes, and the fleet resumed work supporting the ground troops slogging ashore. Despite the annihilation of the Japanese surface fleet, however, danger still lurked below the waves. On November 3, 1944, *Reno* was steaming back to Leyte from the Admiralty Islands with a large portion of the task force, having topped off on fuel at sea that morning. Though the escorts were alertly scanning with sonar, a Japanese submarine, the I-41, slipped through the protective screen of destroyers and cruisers.

At 11:25 p.m., under the crisp light of a full moon, I-41 fired torpedoes at what its captain believed was an American aircraft carrier. Two of the torpedoes slammed into *Reno*. One embedded in the hull and failed to explode, but the other penetrated four decks below topside. "A momentary sheet of flame leaped high on the port side," according to the ship's report, ripping one of the 10-ton 40mm gun mounts free and launching it into the air in "a cascade of 40mm shells." The mangled gun structure crashed back on the deck and destroyed a set of *Reno*'s torpedo mounts. The explosion tore a huge hole 33 feet wide and 22 feet high in *Reno*'s port side near the after-engine room. The concussion likely killed a number of *Reno* sailors outright, but worse was yet to come as seawater rapidly flooded in.

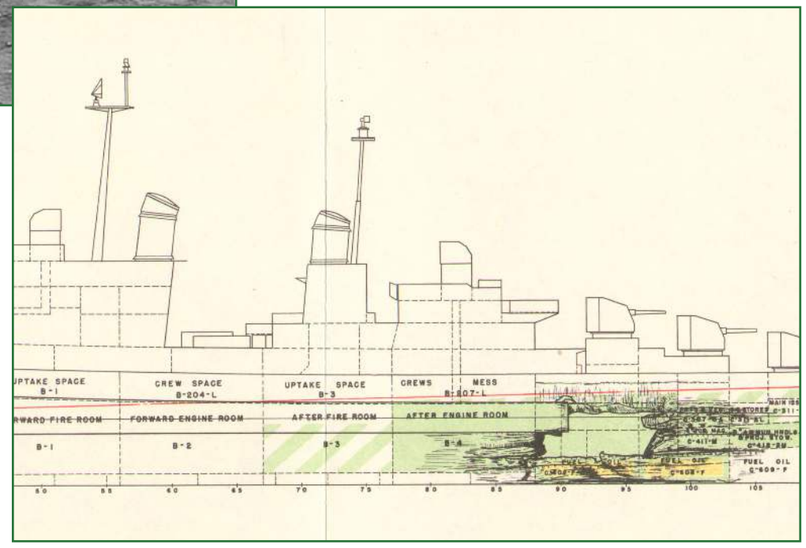
"In the after-living and engine-room compartments," where Setler would have been stationed, "men were either trapped or fled for safety as oil and water burst into the spaces. The lights dimmed and went out. The ship listed slowly to port, as if being gently pushed over." *Reno* had instantly lost power and steering. Training and discipline kicked in, and power was restored 15 minutes later. The crew quickly contained the flooding by sealing watertight compartments. Miraculously, *Reno* stayed afloat. I-41 slunk away, denied its only kill of the war, to be sunk two weeks later by a pair of American destroyers.

Three destroyers stayed with *Reno* to assist her return across 700 miles of open sea to a forward base at Ulithi, and helped transfer the wounded and other nonessential personnel off the crippled cruiser. Those still aboard struggled to rebalance the ship and fought electrical fires springing forth



The badly damaged USS *Reno* (CL-96) is towed to port after being hit by a torpedo in the Philippines. *NHHC*

Below: Detail from a Navy damage report of *Reno's* torpedo hit. *NHHC*



from damaged circuits. After temporary repairs at Ulithi and Manus, *Reno* would eventually return to the United States under her own power with a skeleton crew.

Ralph Setler was not among them. The unexpected torpedo attack had claimed his life. Though in the chaos of the initial explosion and flooding the exact circumstances are not known, it seems likely that the force of the explosion killed Setler immediately, or that he was drowned by the rush of water that inundated the after-engine room and nearby compartments. His body was not recovered and was probably swept out to sea. Setler was one of 46 sailors lost aboard *Reno* in the attack.

As a young man who left to serve his country, Ralph had no wife or children. He was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart. He is honored at a memorial to American servicemen at Fort McKinley in Manila, Philippines, and by a National Cemetery marker in his hometown of Grafton—far from the sea that claimed his final remains.

2024
Grafton, West Virginia
WEST VIRGINIA NATIONAL CEMETERIES PROJECT

SOURCES

FULL BIBLIOGRAPHY TO BE INCLUDED IN FINAL VERSION

SOURCES

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

ABOUT THE PROJECT

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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