

# But for the Turn of a Screw

*Sotomayor might have never been appointed to Supreme Court*

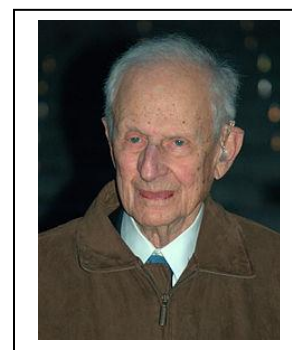


*the*

*By Robert Porter Lynch Brown '69 February 2018*

## **Sotomayor's Mentor, Robert Morgenthau, barely Survived WWII**

On Tuesday, June 2, 2009 I was sitting in the office of the legendary New York City District Attorney, [Robert M. Morgenthau](#). He was 90 years old, had fought crime in the Big Apple since 1975, and was destined to retire at the end of the year as New York State's oldest DA. Morgenthau's exploits were iconic fighting the mob; he was the original role model for the DA in the popular *Law and Order* TV series.



I was presenting him with a painting the [U.S.S. Harry F. Bauer](#) created by my father, Robert B. Lynch (Brown '44), who was a quite good amateur artist. Upon graduating from Brown, he served as a junior officer aboard the *Bauer*; Robert Morgenthau was his Executive Officer.

Unexpectedly, it was a very busy day. Over the weekend President Obama had announced the nomination of the nation's first Hispanic woman for Supreme Court Justice.

Reporters were streaming into Morgenthau's office for interviews about Sonia Sotomayor, who he mentored in her early career while she served as Morgenthau's Assistant District Attorney.

Morgenthau's staff in the late 1970s was overloaded with a massive build-up of cases. He needed fresh blood, and especially someone from the Hispanic community. Before graduating from Yale Law School in 1979, Sotomayor stepped into the breach during an era when the City was plagued with crisis-level crime rates.

As a rookie prosecutor, Sotomayor threw herself into the job, chipping away at the heavy caseload burden that included shoplifting, prostitution, robberies, and murders. Her courage and adeptness in tough neighborhoods interviewing witnesses built trust with the community. She was also masterful in the courtroom, simplifying issues to enable juries in making incisive decisions. Working overtime, she earned the reputation of a strong work ethic coupled with courageousness, preparedness, and fairness.

During an interlude between reporter's questions, I quipped, "But for the turn of a screw, Sonia might never have become a Supreme Court nominee."

Morgenthau raised an eyebrow.

I responded, "If that Japanese kamikaze bomb's fuse had set, neither you nor I would be here today."



Japanese "Judy" Dive Bomber hit by Anti-Aircraft shells

The twinkle in his keen eye indicated concurrence.

## My Father is Assigned to Morgenthau's ship

As an R.O.T.C. graduate of Brown University in 1944, my father was commissioned as a naval officer and assigned to the *U.S.S. Harry F. Bauer*, a destroyer built in Bath, Maine. His Executive Officer (2<sup>nd</sup> in command) was Robert W. Morgenthau, the son of President Roosevelt's Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau.

The "Exec" was already a war hero. His ship, the [U.S. S. Landsdale](#), escorting a convoy into the Mediterranean in April 1944 was attacked by waves of German torpedo bombers. The ship suffered a multitude of hits and rapidly took on water. All hands abandoned ship as the *Lansdale* quickly broke up and sank. 234 men, including Morgenthau, survived (47 went down to their deaths).

Morgenthau was quickly reassigned that year to the *Bauer*, where my father served as Combat Information Officer. After their shakedown cruise, the *Bauer* passed through the Panama Canal to join the Pacific Fleet.

As my father recounted years later, these were dangerous waters without Japanese adversaries. In mid-December of 1944, Typhoon Cobra swamped the Pacific Fleet off the Philippines; its deadly goliath winds and waves tossed ships like they were mere rowboats. He sadly recounted losing fellow



Harry F. Bauer DD-738/DM-26

officers he personally admired as the storm engulfed three destroyers just like the *Bauer*; the deadly devil-wind sent all hands to their graves, totally 775 officers and enlisted men, dead or washed overboard from the three ships alone. Admiral Halsey, in his autobiography, described the power of the typhoon:

"No one who has not been through a typhoon can conceive its fury. The 70 foot seas smash you. The rain blinds you. The battleship *New Jersey* once was hit by a 5-inch shell and I did not even feel the impact. The [battleship] *Missouri* had kamikaze crash on her main deck and we repaired the only damage with a paint brush. But the typhoon tossed our enormous ship the *Missouri* as if she were only a canoe."

The *Bauer* departed Pearl Harbor (27 January '45) for the invasion Iwo Jima, the next stop in the island hopping campaign to end the Japanese terror. As the heroic invasion troops stormed ashore (19 February '45), the *Bauer* acted as a picket vessel and carried out antisubmarine patrol to protect the -transports. She then conducted shore bombardment, destroying several gun emplacements, tanks, and supply dumps.

## The Battle of Okinawa

In late March, '45 the *Bauer* was the first naval vessel to arrive in the waters off the coast of Okinawa in advance of the massive invasion, which would be the largest amphibious assault of the Pacific war, engaging one thousand, five hundred ships, a quarter million troops. It was the last of the major battles of the war, and horribly deadly. Nearly 50,000 men suffered casualties, including 12,500 deaths. The Japanese struck back,

defending the island with over one hundred thousand hardened troops. By the battle's end, nearly all the Japanese lay dead or wounded.

Morgenthau, my father, and the crew of the *Bauer* were attacked by waves of Japanese aircraft and a pack of Japanese submarines, as the Japanese resorted to desperate, but futile, efforts to stop the invasion with over fifteen hundred kamikaze suicide tactical attacks. The Japanese navy raced to engage their American rivals.

Japan's strategy was to wage a battle so fierce the Americans would be dissuaded from attacking their homeland.

Soon after arrival, (25 March '45) a wave of Japanese aircraft pounded the ship. The heroic vessel survived, shooting down three planes (29 March '45). The radar picket destroyers were pummeled hard, as they were first in line for the Japanese attacking aircraft. By the day of the invasion, 1 April, the *Bauer* and her sister mine craft had swept the channels and laid marker buoys, contributing importantly to the success of the initial landing by providing gunfire support during the landing.

1 April, 1945, Easter Sunday, Naval batteries pounded the shore emplacements to secure the beach head. Wave after wave of Army and Marine Corps forces, amounting to 180,000 hardened Army and Marine Corps infantry, artillery, tanks, and amphibious assault vehicles streamed ashore.

A week later a torpedo bomber's "fish" crashed through the bow, and blew right through the other side. Fortunately, the warhead's fuse failed to detonate. (Destroyers are nicknamed "tin cans" because of their thin skins) (6 April '45). The attacks continued for two days. Another picket, the [U.S.S. Abele DD 733](#) was sunk by an onslaught of suicide bombers.

Two weeks passed when (20 April '45) the ship was attacked again by another squadron of Japanese planes. The *Bauer* splashed three more aircraft, while assisting in downing two others. Another week later (27 April '45) the crew ward off another series of aerial attacks, shooting down one more plane.

Soon after (11 May '45), a further wave of kamikaze suicide planes attacked the *Bauer*. In a suicide dive, a kamikaze pilot succumbed to intense fire, glancing off the stern boat deck, slicing through a row of high explosive depth charges on the fantail, casting them into the sea. By another miracle, none exploded. Two more enemy aircraft were shot down that day. A pack of submarines began their assault, resulting in the *Bauer's* assist in the destruction of one of the subs. (27 May '45)

As June came, the fleet was in high alert for Typhoon Connie bound for Okinawa (5 June '45). Fortunately for the *Bauer* and her squadron, the typhoon veered away, instead blasting Halsey's Third Fleet with sixty-foot seas and 150 knot winds. This was just the calm before the real storm.

The next day the Japanese kamikaze counter-attack intensified. A large squadron of enemy planes filled the anti-aircraft flak-laden sky. Pummeled and bruised, the *Bauer* gallantly fought back, knocking three more suicide planes out of the air. One of the suicide dive bombers glanced off the ship's superstructure. The ship was pretty beaten up, with a multitude of bullet and shrapnel holes, but still afloat and fully operational.

Apparently, during the battle one of the ship's below-waterline fuel tanks, located amidships, ruptured. The crew believed they must have been hit by shrapnel. Two compartments were flooded. Unbeknownst to the officers and their shipmates, the last dive bomber had penetrated with an unexploded bomb in the fuel tank.

For the *Bauer's* gallant action, she received a [Presidential Citation](#):

“for extraordinary heroism in action” to maintain a “seaworthy, fighting ship, complemented by skilled and courageous officers and men... achieving a notable record of gallantry in combat, attesting to the teamwork of her entire company and enhancing the finest traditions of the United States Naval Service.”

In the squadron was the [Aaron Ward](#), DM 34 – the *Bauer*’s sister ship. On the night of 30 April, the *Ward* took up position on radar picket station #10, repulsing several air attacks. Bad weather kept enemy airpower away until 3 May. When the weather cleared, a swarm of about 20 suicide planes attacked all the ships on station with a vengeance. The *Ward* opened fire knocking out the first plane, which fell harmlessly about 100 yards off her starboard quarter. Again, scoring hits, the second kamikaze was destroyed closing within 1,000 yards



USS *Aaron Ward* (DM-34) damaged by kamikazes, May 1945

While struck numerous times by the ship’s anti-aircraft guns, a third attacker advanced on her stern. The determined pilot crashed into the ship’s superstructure after releasing a bomb which smashed through her hull below the waterline and exploded in the after-engine room, flooding it and the fire rooms, ruptured fuel tanks, set the leaking oil ablaze, and severed steering control connections to the bridge. The rudder jammed at hard left. Topside, the plane itself spread fire and destruction. Many sailors were killed or injured by the crash.

Damage control parties worked feverishly to put out fires, repair what damage they could, jettison ammunition in danger of exploding, and attend to the wounded. By sheer bravery she managed to knock out several more attackers. One kamikaze fought through *Ward*’s hail of anti-aircraft fire, releasing its bomb just before crashing into her main deck. The bomb exploded a few feet close aboard her port side; its fragments showered the ship and blew a large hole through the shell plating near her forward fireroom. As a result, the ship lost all power and gradually lost headway. Her main gun mounts were out of commission. Another enemy plane crashed into the ship’s deckhouse, causing several more fires while injuring and killing many more crewmen.

The *Ward* endured two more crashes. At dusk another crashed into her port quarter. As the kamikaze’s gasoline engulfed the deck, ammunition began exploding, and still more heavy casualties resulted. The warship went dead in the water, her aft superstructure deck demolished, and she was still on fire. While damage control crews fought the fires and flooding, *Ward* began to settle in the water, listing heavily to her port side. Then the last suicide attack came in at high speed, low off the water, crashed into the base of her number 2 stack. The explosion blew the plane, the stack, and two gun mounts into the air, all strewn across the aft deck. Through the night, her crew fought valiantly to save the ship, accomplishing that mission. The next morning the [Shannon](#) DM25 arrived and took *Aaron Ward* in tow. Early on the morning of 4 May, she arrived at Kerama Retto, where she began temporary repairs, enabling her to sail home, battered but brave. It was no less of a miracle she survived being hit by seven Kamikazes.

## But for the Turn of a Screw

On 11 June, the *Bauer* escorted her destroyer sister-ship, the [J. William Ditter](#), DM-31, back to safety in the nearby Kerama Retto islands (about 20 miles south west of Okinawa). The *Ditter* had also been pounded in the same final air attack. Her gun crews downed five planes. One of the suicide planes knocked off her No. 2 stack and another crashed into her port side near the main deck. Despite suffering extensive damage and many casualties, valiant Damage Control efforts kept her afloat.

Once in Kerama Retto the *Bauer* had her damage surveyed. An Associated Press article in the *Providence Journal*, saved in my mother's scrapbook describes the event:

### ***Ship Held Unexploded Bomb 17 Days after Battle***

The destroyer minelayer *Harry F. Bauer*, which shot down 13 Kamikaze planes in action off Okinawa, learned that for 17 days since the battle they had been literally walking with death underfoot.

Lt.(jg) Robert B. Lynch, (Combat Information Officer) 5 Legion Way, Cranston, will remember for the rest of his days that three threads on a bomb fuse probably was all that prevented him from becoming a name on the Navy Department casualty lists.

#### ***Bomb in Fuel Tank***

Unnoticed during the heat of battle, a 550-pound aerial bomb from a kamikaze hit the ship. The kamikaze released the bomb just moments before crashing into the ship amidships with a glancing blow. The bomb pierced the hull and fell into a fuel tank without exploding.

The unexploded bomb was discovered when the flooded fuel tanks of the destroyer were emptied. The hole in the tank had been believed caused by shrapnel.

During the battle, the destroyer was also pierced by an aerial torpedo, which entered the port bow and passed through the starboard bow, also without exploding. The "tail" of the "fish" was left hanging inside the ship, and discovered when the ship was surveyed for repairs.

#### ***3 Threads from Death***

No one with sufficient experience in defusing bombs was aboard the destroyer, and a hurry call was sent for Lt. Charles M. Rupprecht of Englewood, N.J., air ordnance officer aboard one of Halsey's Third Fleet carriers.

The Lieutenant, who is over six feet tall, removed the bomb on June 30th. He worked alone for four hours in the bottom of the tank, removing the tail and nose fuses of the bomb and fitting a hoist to it so it could be lifted from the ship.

Later examination of the fuses belied the ordnance officer's statement that his job was "just routine." It was found that three threads in each fuse were all that prevented the firing pins from dropping on the charges. Apparently the kamikaze pilot released the bomb just a moment too late to arm the bomb. Had the arming propeller turned another second, the bomb would have become armed, dropping the firing pins on the charges. Had the pins dropped, the bomb would have exploded and probably caused the loss of the destroyer and all its crew, other ordnance officers said.

-30 -

\*\*\*\*\*

But for the turn of three threads of a screw, the world would have been a different place.



Robert Morgenthau would not have been New York's DA.  
 Sonia Sotomayor might not have been thrust into prominence.  
 And I would not have written this story.

The odds of a Japanese Kamikaze pilot hitting his target was one-in-three. Wave after wave of Kamikazes attacked the *Harry F. Bauer's* squadron. Bauer was responsible for at least thirteen shot down (and three more 'probable') by Morgenthau's ship.

Was the *Harry F. Bauer* the luckiest ship in the Navy? Or was it Divine Intervention?

-30-

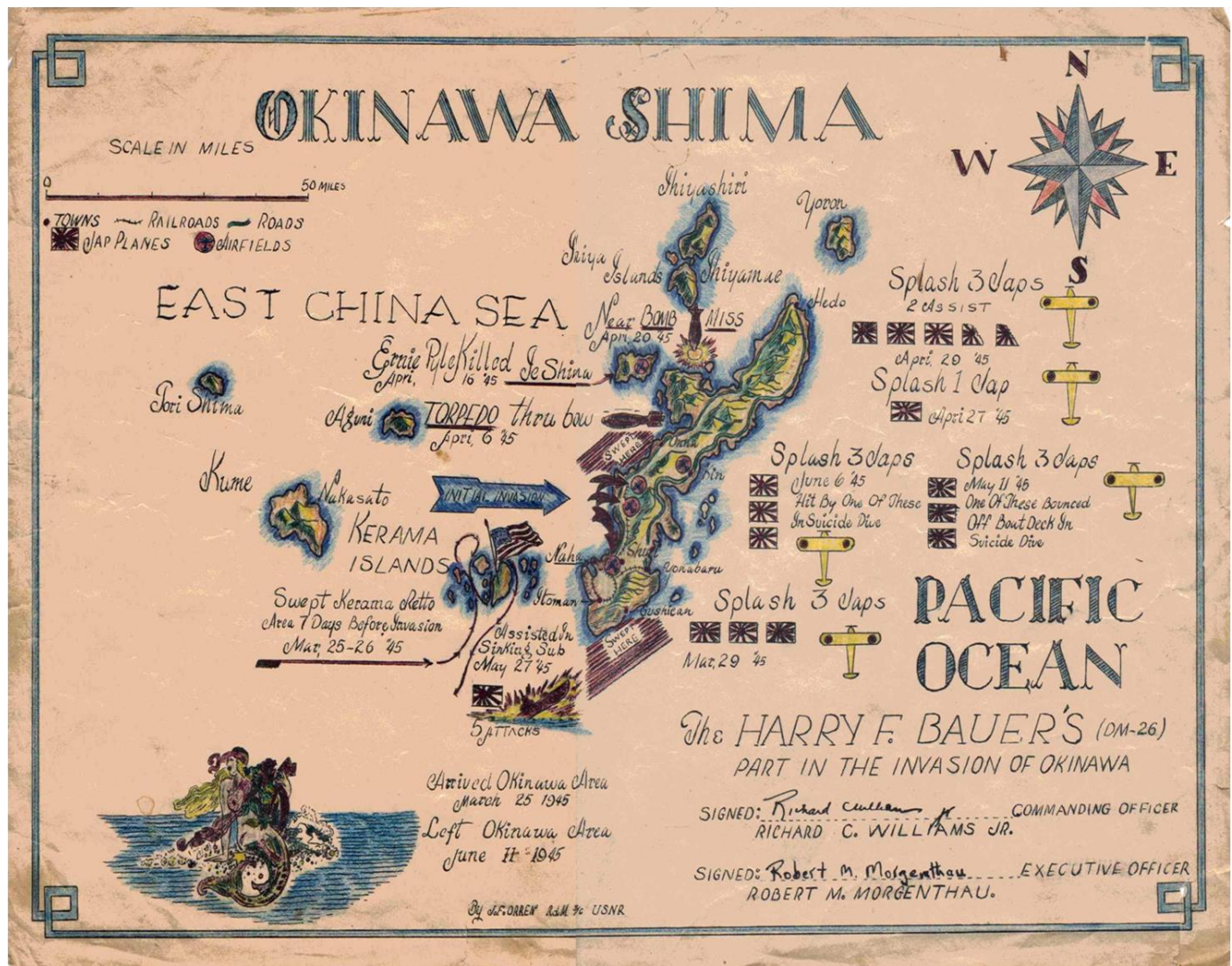


Figure 1: Harry F. Bauer's role in the Battle of Okinawa with detail of each attack

The Navy's losses in the battle were horrific; the Fifth Fleet suffered: 36 sunk ships, 368 damaged ships, 4,900 men killed or drowned, 4,800 men wounded, 763 lost aircraft.