

# THE TIN CAN SAILOR

Spring 2025



# The USS *Emmons*: A Story of Ordinary Men Showing Extraordinary Valor

By Donna Jolly

Commemorating the anniversary of the attack on the USS *Emmons* by five kamikaze planes during World War II

The story of the USS *Emmons* and Pearl Harbor are intertwined. On 7 December 1941, young men – some as young as 16 and 17, straight out of high school – heard the news about the U.S. Naval Base in Pearl Harbor being attacked by Japan and decided right then and there to join the Navy. Two days earlier, the USS *Emmons* had been commissioned at Boston Naval Shipyard. Many of her first shipmates were those young men from New England, New York, and Pennsylvania. They were young but fearless – and spurred by love of country and patriotic fire. They had no idea how just three years later their bravery would be tested – nor the sacrifices they would make. They didn't know how a lifelong bond would be forged among the survivors of a tragic kamikaze attack off the coast of Okinawa – thousands of miles away from their home.

USS *Emmons* (DD 457) was a *Benson-Livermore*-class destroyer built at the Bath Iron Works in Maine. Named after the distinguished 19<sup>th</sup> century naval officer, Rear Admiral George Foster Emmons, she was the last naval fighting ship to be commissioned before the United States officially entered World War II.

As the war commenced, the USS *Emmons* and her crew went where they were needed and performed every duty asked of them. They served in both European and Pacific theaters during World War II. They operated from South America to the Arctic, through every major Atlantic and Mediterranean campaign – excluding Sicily and Italy landings – without casualties or damage. The *Emmons*



*Engine Room crew on the Emmons.*



*USS Emmons (DD 457)*

served as antisubmarine patrol, convoy escort, plane guard, picket duty, mail boat, ice patrol, liberty boat, ferry boat, and gunfire support. While they didn't know it at the time, they served as part of the escorting entourage for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was headed to war strategy conferences with Allied leaders in Tehran and Cairo in November 1943.

Their patrolling and training paid off when they were called to assist with "Operation Overlord" (the Normandy invasion). On 6 June 1944 (D-Day), the USS *Emmons* joined with other destroyers and minesweepers from the U.S. and Britain to support the mobile shore batteries at Omaha Beach. For several hours, the *Emmons* and other destroyers blasted an identifiable enemy target from one to three thousand yards offshore, including a church steeple suspected of being a German observation post. While the *Emmons* exchanged fire with a shore battery located east of Port-en-Bessin, there were no casualties or damage. With that exchange, the *Emmons* can claim to have opened the first counterbattery fire at Omaha.

After taking part in a second part of the invasion in southern France, the *Emmons* returned to Boston and was converted to a destroyer/minesweeper. By 22 December 1944, DD 457 had become DMS 22. After a brief period of training and exercises with other minesweepers in Pearl Harbor, the *Emmons* was called to the Western Pacific for the Okinawa campaign. . . and to a battle she would not survive.

On 6 April 1945, the USS *Emmons* and USS *Rodman* (DMS 21) joined to provide protection for smaller minesweepers on the northwest tip of Okinawa. This was also the date that Japan, in desperation, opened the most massive suicide attacks of the war. Altogether over two days, 355 suicide missions were launched against the fleet.

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The *Emmons* and *Rodman* absorbed a good percentage of their sting.

Throughout the day, there were air raid alerts, but no enemy bothered the minesweeping group until the middle of the afternoon. Then, two bogies were reported closing in on the *Rodman* to the west of the *Emmons*.

Ed Hoffman, quartermaster on the *Emmons*, related: “We saw the *Rodman* get hit and we pulled up along her port side. They were putting out fires but told us they could handle it and to take care of ourselves essentially.”

Armand Jolly, gunner’s mate on board the *Emmons* saw the “plane come out of the sky and go straight down to the *Rodman*, hitting it on the fo’c’sle. I jumped in my gun and then everyone else did. We saw planes coming right for us and we got some shots off.”

By this time, aircraft carriers had arrived and began to engage the kamikazes, shooting down 50 of the enemy planes.

For a while it appeared the combination of the fire from the destroyers and the friendly fighters would keep the kamikazes from reaching the ships. The *Emmons* splashed six of the kamikazes; four more crashed into the water missing her.

But, at 1732, the first suicide plane hit the *Emmons*, taking out its fantail. In rapid succession, four others hit the ship’s nerve centers: the pilot house to starboard; port side of CIC; the starboard side of Number 3 gun; and, the hull near the waterline at frame 30 to starboard.

On the second hit, Captain Eugene Foss was blown off the bridge. The XO, Lt. Temple Lynds, Jr. was missing, Gunnery Officer Lt. John Griffin assumed command of the ship and quickly assessed the damage. The hull aft was entirely missing and the rudder was blown off. The port main shaft was out of operation. The bridge structure was destroyed and fires raged from the kamikaze planes and exploding 20mm ammunition boxes.



“Target of Opportunity” by Dwight Shepler #150, 1944: watercolor showing *Emmons* dueling with a German 88mm battery on the cliffs above Port-en-Bessin, Normandy, *Emmons*’ primary target in the initial bombardment. Enemy salvos straddled *Emmons* which, with Doyle, returned 5-inch and 40mm fire, silencing the enemy battery.



Armand Jolly, gunner’s mate



Ed Hoffman, quartermaster



Tony Esposito

Several areas began flooding and a ten-degree starboard list was developing. The stern was beginning to settle.

Fire in the superstructure was contained long enough to put over the whaleboat, which began to pick up wounded in the water and deliver them to nearby minesweepers. While wounded were being transferred, a heavy explosion occurred in the handling room of Gun 2. Following this, the order to abandon ship was given.

Ed Hoffman was in the pilot house on engine order telegraph. His job was to respond to the captain’s commands about turning or speed and relay that to the engine room. He remembered the next moments after the *Emmons* was hit this way:

“Captain Foss tried to maneuver to avoid the attacking planes – they were swarming at us from all directions. The first one hit the fantail – we didn’t know it until Chief Thompson said the helm wasn’t responding. The captain said to shift to manual. Unbeknownst to us at the time, but the steering aft wasn’t there – it had been blown away. Then he commanded, ‘Stop all engines.’

That’s when another plane hit the bridge. I woke up on my hands and knees. . . and everything was very red. I knew I had to get out of there. So, I got out on the bridge. As I was going out of the opening, I realized my ankle was

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smashed. The inside ladders were chimneys of flames. I went to another part of the bridge, and I saw the crew coming down. I told Lt. Griffin that I could not walk, and he helped me get down the ladder and into the water.

I got picked up by a life raft along with several other fellows. The current was pulling us into the wreckage of the fantail – we paddled with whatever we could find. We finally got free of that. It was dark by the time we were picked up by a minesweeper and taken to an auxiliary hospital ship. My eyes were swollen shut from burns by that time. I stayed there for 10 days, then went to a hospital in Guam where I stayed for several weeks. A few other shipmates were there, like Armand Jolly, and that's where we were presented with our Purple Hearts. From there, I went to New York where I stayed in a hospital for 10 months, so I stayed in a hospital for a little over a year.”

When the first plane hit the *Emmons*, Tony Esposito was on the bridge. He was responsible for releasing depth charges.

“I was standing behind the machine gunner and I see this plane coming in. . .and I'm hollering to the gunner, 'Get em, get em' and he did shoot him down. It was very close. Right after that, I looked on the starboard side and I see this Betty and Zeke coming in low on the water. I hollered to the captain, 'Betty and Zeke coming in low on the starboard quarter,' but it was too late, they already hit.

When I came to, I found myself leaning up against the bulkhead. A 20mm gun ammunition case had me pinned against the railing. That's what kept me from going over. The gunner – he was blown over. And the loader was killed. If that thing hadn't hit and pinned me there, I would have been overboard too. After that, I went down to the main deck. I was looking for my two buddies.”

Tony found four of his shipmates, including Lt. Griffin and Ed Hoffman. “We were the only guys who got off the bridge alive. We were undecided about whether to go over the railing [into the water] and someone hollered 'Abandon ship!' We jumped into the whaleboat, came around the starboard side, picked up a couple of the wounded and brought them over to the hospital ship. Then we went

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“*The Battle for Fox Green Beach*” by Dwight Shepler #146, 1944: oil on canvas showing Emmons bombarding German positions covering the eastern sector of Omaha Beach, Normandy, 6 June 1944. American forces fought all day for this stretch of Omaha beachhead. Its benign green bluffs and valley entrance were a maze of crossfire from enfilading German 88mm guns, mortars and machine guns, which raked the beaches and pinned down the infantry in a small area before expertly-placed minefields. By mid-afternoon, disabled landing craft were clogging the few gaps in the beach obstacles, while under a rain of short and long-range artillery fire, support waves circled and jockeyed for an opening. Destroyers moved toward the beach in shoal water to pump salvos of 5-inch shells into stubborn German emplacements and mobile targets of opportunity. The house in the valley and the spire of Colleville-Sur-Mer's Church of Notre Dame on the hill were landmarks of Fox Green Beach. Germans used the spire as an artillery control tower, with spotters able to see the full panorama of the American forces and direct artillery fire at opportune targets. The church's lovely renaissance architecture crumbled into sad rubble when a U.S. fire-control party on the beach called on Emmons to demolish it. It was this beach that Hemingway described in his article “*Voyage to Victory*.”

around picking up guys in the water. We picked up maybe six or seven guys. Then we were picked up by another destroyer escort.”

Armand Jolly, who was in Gun No. 1, remembered when the first plane hit. “I jumped out of my gun because it was aflame. I laid on the deck for a while. When I got up, I heard, ‘Abandon ship.’ So, I went off the fo’c’sle. I had no life jacket. My face was burned, my hands were burned. I swam for a while til someone picked me up in a lifeboat.”

Ed Hoffman, Tony Esposito, and Armand Jolly were among the survivors. But 60 of their shipmates (including eight officers) were killed. Sixty-five were wounded.

The *Emmons*’ burning hulk drifted all night toward Ie Shima, held by the enemy. Early the next morning, Saturday, 7 April 1945, the decision was made to sink the *Emmons* so that she wouldn’t fall into enemy hands. This was done by 5" gunfire from the minesweeper *Ellyson*.

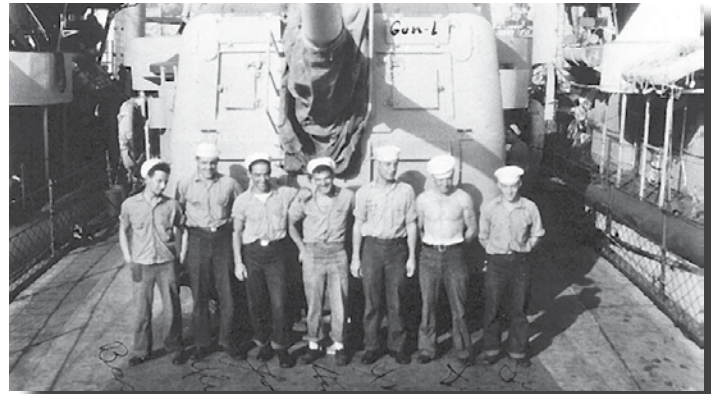
It was a sad ending for a noble ship manned, loved, and fought by a brave and selfless crew.

Several officers and crewmen from the *Emmons* received individual recognition for outstanding performance of duty on 6 April 1945, with awards of one Navy Cross, four Silver Stars, and eight Bronze Stars. All personnel serving on *Emmons* at the time of the sinking received a Navy Unit Commendation Ribbon. The commendation reads in part:

“Although lightly armed and highly vulnerable while operating in dangerous mined waters, the *Emmons* rendered heroic service in minesweeping, fire support, radar picket, anti-suicide boat, antisubmarine and anti-aircraft screen missions. A natural and frequent target for heavy Japanese aerial attack, she was constantly vigilant and ready for battle, firing her guns valiantly against a group of Japanese suicide planes striking in force on 6 April, and downing six of the attackers before five others crashed her in rapid succession, killing or wounding many personnel and inflicting damage which resulted in her sinking. By her own aggressiveness and the courage and skill of her officers and men, the USS *Emmons* achieved a record of gallantry in combat reflecting the highest credit upon herself and the United States Naval Service.”

The *Emmons* lay at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean for 56 years before she was discovered in 2001.

During the summer of 2000, the Japanese Coast Guard had begun searching for an underwater wreck that Okinawan fisherman suspected was leaking oil. Using a remote camera, they found something but were unable to identify it. On 19 February 2001, Richard Ruth of Fathoms Dive Shop, Okinawa and a team of divers found the wreckage of a ship resting on her starboard side about 140 feet below the ocean’s surface just north of Okinawa’s Motobu Peninsula. Ruth and other local divers



Crew of the USS *Emmons*.

spent months searching for clues on the internet and in history books. After finding the USS *Emmons*’ website and consulting with veterans, they concluded the wreck was the USS *Emmons*.

A group of experienced divers based in Okinawa have continued to dive to the *Emmons*, maintaining a visual record of the ship’s condition. These divers have taken on the role of caretakers of the *Emmons*, watching over the ship – a hallowed grave at sea for the men who went down with it. Each April, they conduct a special dive to the ship to mark the fateful attack, and the sacrifice of her crew members. The divers lay a wreath of flowers, an American flag and U.S. Navy flag on her bow.

“The divers’ dedication to preserving and honoring the legacy of the *Emmons* and her crew was deeply moving and meaningful to the shipmates and now to us, their family members,” said Tom Hoffman, son of Ed Hoffman and secretary/treasurer of the USS *Emmons* Association. The association preserves the legacy of the brave shipmates of the USS *Emmons* by awarding scholarships to college students each year and holding annual reunions, attended first by shipmates and now by their family members.

“There is a special bond among shipmates,” said Ed Hoffman, “and what happened to the *Emmons* made it doubly special.”

“We went through a lot together,” said Tony Esposito, “and it’s always good to see them. I look forward to these (reunions) each year.”

Armand Jolly, who attended every reunion, said, “We are family. Never forget.”

While Ed, Tony, and Armand (and the other members of the *Emmons* crew) are no longer with us – family members remain committed to keeping their legacy of courage, selflessness, and patriotism alive for future generations. Never forget.

For more information about the *Emmons*, including video interviews with 14 shipmates during an *Emmons* family reunion, visit [www.ussemmons.org](http://www.ussemmons.org).

Credit to Edward Baxter Billingsley *THE EMMONS SAGA: A History of the USS EMMONS (DD 457-DMS 22)* 🐙

# The Legacy of the USS *Emmons*

By Kurtis Reese

At 1045, “To the Colors was sounded.” The colors and commission pennant were hoisted, placing the ship in commission.” USS *Emmons* log, 5 December 1941.

I came to Okinawa as a Marine in 1996. In 1997, I earned my Open Water and Advanced Open Water Dive certification. My next duty station was 29 Palms, California. I returned to Okinawa in 1998 and jumped at the opportunity to further my dive education which included Rescue Diver and Divemaster. I took those classes with my mentor, Charles A. “Chuck” DeCesari. Chuck and I had many discussions about possible wrecks and the seeming lack of any in the waters around Okinawa.

During this time, I began in depth research of World War II, and in particular, Naval actions which resulted in ship sinkings. All indications were that any wrecks that might have existed had been salvaged or were sunk in water too deep to dive. Although disheartened, I continued my research hoping to find something that would lead to a wreck in diveable depths. Still, I found nothing.

1999 saw me briefly return to the United States. That fall, Okinawa was hit by Typhoon Bart, which packed winds with speeds varying from 160 to 234 miles per hour. After the storm passed, local fishermen reported an oil slick on the surface off the coast of Kouri-Jima, Okinawa. The Japanese Coast Guard deployed side scan sonar which revealed the silhouette of a ship on the seafloor.

In 2000, I again had the opportunity to return to Okinawa. I earned my Open Water Scuba Instructor certification at Chuck’s urging. Word of a sunken ship had not yet made the rounds, but some American divers had heard of the discovery and began a systematic search of the waters off Kouri-Jima. On 19 February 2001, Rich Ruth, Tami Clark, and Steve Tomlin anchored in the right spot and were thrilled to discover, as they reached the bottom, the wreck of a World War II-era U.S. destroyer/minesweeper.

The location of the ship was not widely released after that initial dive but after a few weeks, coordinates to the wreck began to spread through the diving community. Chuck got wind of the location and was able to arrange a boat to take us to the site. On 14 April 2001, 56 years after she was sunk, our chartered boat slowed to a stop and moored to a surface buoy marking the location of the USS *Emmons* (DD 457/ DMS 22). One hundred and fifty feet below the surface, a piece of World War II history awaited our visit.

As we descended through the water column, the USS *Emmons* came into view. I could not believe my eyes. Here it was right in front of us, a part of World War II history. She was on her starboard side with the deck at what appeared to be a 60-to-70-degree angle. We had made our descent



*Divers pay their respects to the USS Emmons and crew during the annual Memorial dive. Photo by Mike Boring.*

on the bow and from there, the ship looked like it could just right itself and sail away. Five-inch gun #1 was pointed towards the surface with the port side of its housing blown open. Five-inch gun #2 was pointed towards the bow, its housing appearing intact. As we proceeded aft, the degree of damage became more evident. The captain’s stateroom was gone. Debris littered the sea floor “above” the deck. The smokestacks were detached and flattened in the sand. An acoustic mine hammer, nose down, was standing upright where it had landed after falling out of its cradle on the port side.

Further aft on the port side, a twin Bofors 40mm AA gun stood at the ready, barrels pointed towards the surface of the water. MK 9 depth charges and minesweeping paravanes from the starboard side of the ship were scattered about in the sand. On the port side, a depth charge was mounted to an arbor and sitting in the K-gun, ready for launch. A depth charge rack nearby held two depth charges.

As we reached the stern, off in the distance, the detached rudder was sitting upside down. The starboard propeller was half buried in the sand. Helmets and boots littered the shattered deck. Two depth charges peeked out from their below decks storage area below what would have been enlisted berthing.

All too soon our time was up and we had to head to the surface. That first dive left an indelible mark on my mind. Our close group of friends knew we would have to return to dive the *Emmons* again.

We dove the *Emmons* infrequently between the rest of 2001 and 2005. Every year, as close to the anniversary of the sinking as possible, we would conduct a memorial dive and perform a simple ceremony by placing a wreath on the

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surface of the water over the wreck. By this time, Chuck and I had established contact with the USS *Emmons* Association and we did our best to keep them up to date on the condition of their ship.

In 2006, I took about a year off from diving to focus on other endeavors. I stayed in contact with Chuck DeCesari and he kept me up to date on his visits to the *Emmons*.

In 2008, I received an email from a producer with the History Channel. He was looking for a diver to guide Don Wildman, the host of “Cities of the Underworld,” to the USS *Emmons* site as they were interested in including it in an episode titled “Okinawa: Tunnels of Hell.” Chuck and I both jumped at the opportunity for the *Emmons* to be featured in a television production. The production team visited Okinawa in June of that year and the episode aired in November.

The opportunity to take part in this show and highlight the *Emmons* ignited the motivation for Chuck and me to document, as much as possible, the condition of the *Emmons* as the years progressed. I invested in some high-definition video equipment and lights to use on future dives to the *Emmons*. Over time, the equipment became smaller, lighter, and much more manageable.

In 2009, we conducted our first big memorial dive for the 64<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Emmons* final battle. We took the U.S. flag and a wreath down to the ship and placed them at the location of the memorial plaque. The plaque had been commissioned by the *Emmons* Association and shipped to Okinawa. It was placed on the *Emmons* by the same group who first discovered the *Emmons* location back in 2001. This was all documented on video and then edited and put to music. Copies were sent to the *Emmons* Association for presentation at the annual reunion.

Every year since then, we’ve conducted a memorial dive as close to the anniversary of the sinking as possible. Recent years have seen the addition of the U.S. Navy flag to the Stars and Stripes and wreath we take to place on the ship. As usual, I shoot these dives on video, edit the scenes, and set them to music which is forwarded to the *Emmons* Association. Chuck DeCesari generously provides the use of his boat. In earlier years, James Winter would take photos to document the event. More recently, Mike Boring has been our photographer.

We have seen some major changes in the condition of the ship over the years. Starting at the bow, what used to be a small triangular hole in the port bow has collapsed inward to reveal interior compartments. This has allowed the ever-present currents to run directly into the ship and weaken and collapse the deck at the bow from the inside out. These collapses have reached the bulkheads that lead into the upper ammunition handling area for 5-inch gun #1 below the weather deck and the chief petty officers’ quarters the next level down.



Kurt Reese photographing the Mk-37 gun director that has collapsed to the seabed. The remains of the wheelhouse and superstructure are to the right of the gun director. Photo by Mike Boring.

Five-inch gun #1 gun looks mostly the same as it has since 2001. Five-inch gun #2 has seen the port side of its housing collapse inward, revealing the inner workings of the turret.

The bridge, though already detached from the ship, was still structurally intact when we first dove the wreck. Now, the rounded front of the bridge has separated from the bulkheads which have collapsed to the sand below, burying any interior components in that area.

Exterior structures, weakened by decades immersed in salt water have collapsed with “sheets” of bulkhead falling off the ship and holes opening in the port side bulkheads.

As divers proceed aft, they used to be greeted by the sight of the port side 40mm anti-aircraft gun with its dual barrels pointed towards the ocean surface. Now, having shifted under its own weight and with the support structure beneath the gun tub bending and collapsing, the entire weapon system had flipped upside down and its barrels were now dug into the sand.

With the collapse of the Bofors, the entire overhead structure of the enlisted washroom had crumbled and disintegrated. Visible were dual rows of sinks, troughs where the wooden slats for the toilets were mounted and the urinals half buried in silt and debris.

Severe fire damage was evident in the upper ammunition handling room of 5-inch gun #3 with the turret of that weapon, which was completely intact in 2001, now completely gone, having twisted itself apart under its own shifting weight. All that remains now are the base of the turret, the breech, and the barrel of the gun.

MK 9 depth charge arbors are on the port side bulkhead below 5-inch gun #3 along with one minesweeping paravane still in the cradle.

Everything aft of 5-inch gun #3 is broken wide open. The stern suffered serious damage during the *Emmons* final

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battle on 6 April 1945 and every year this area has degraded a bit more. MK 9 depth charges peer out from their below deck's storage area. Only two used to be visible. Recently, the bulkheads around the depth charges have collapsed and they have started spilling out. Three have completely fallen out with another four visible in an area that, now completely open to the outside, used to be closed off. A collapsing bulkhead forward of the depth charges reveals powder cans for the 5-inch guns stacked neatly in their storage area.

The rear-most enlisted berthing area is completely devoid of racks and foot lockers. The next compartment forward looks like a giant went in and ripped all the racks off the bulkhead and tossed them to starboard. Footlockers with the tops disintegrated contain nothing but debris, silt and degraded metal fragments. Fuel oil has accumulated at the high points where the port side bulkhead meets what would have been the overhead when the ship was on an even keel and cruising the world's oceans. The port side stern used to contain numerous helmets all fused together by their years immersed in corrosive salt water. Rubber boots also littered the area, many still in "good" shape and easily identifiable as footwear.

The *Emmons* rudder, snapped off as the ship was sinking, came to rest upside down about 50 feet aft of the propellers.

Over the years, forays out behind the *Emmons* and into its debris field have led to the discovery of an engine from one of the Japanese aircraft that hit the ship, the propeller blades bent backwards from the impact. Most recently, wings and landing gear have also been discovered nearby as well as a section of collapsed funnel from the *Emmons* smokestacks.

Sixty men gave their lives on that historic day, and I feel privileged to be able to document the condition of their ship as time progresses and share my feelings with their shipmates and descendants.

There have been mixed feelings from veterans, divers, and non-divers alike about whether or not shipwrecks should have visitors disturbing the final resting place of sailors. I'd like to point out that everything I have described is visible from the outside of the ship or from cameras mounted on poles with lights. As a former Marine, I feel it's a great honor to be able to visit the *Emmons* and keep her family up to date on the numerous changes she continues to experience as time inevitably progresses. Our efforts also support the USS *Emmons* Scholarship fund. Sales of *Emmons* challenge coins, commissioned by the *Emmons* Association, to divers on our

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Kurt Reese photographing the 40mm Bofors anti-aircraft guns. The gun controllers are visible to the right of the guns and the crew's aft latrines are visible just to the left of the guns. Photo by Mike Boring.



charters see 100% of proceeds go to support the education of direct descendants of *Emmons* sailors.

I must thank the *Emmons* Association for their continued and unwavering support. We are saddened by the recent loss of our friend, Chuck DeCesari. His passing has left us, his wife, and children with heavy hearts. I take solace in the fact that he was able to meet surviving *Emmons* crewmembers on a few occasions and, as a former Marine, is likely swapping stories with shipmates that went before him.

I would also like to thank Mike Boring. His photos help to preserve the legacy of the USS *Emmons* as an important historic artifact.

Video and photos are important tools as you can research them as long as you like without limitations imposed by depth and time.

I will visit the *Emmons* for as long as I'm able and do my part to preserve her legacy for future generations.

For more information and photos, please visit [ussemmons.org](http://ussemmons.org). 🐙



*Divers ascending high above the port side propeller after exploring the wreck. Photo by Mike Boring.*

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