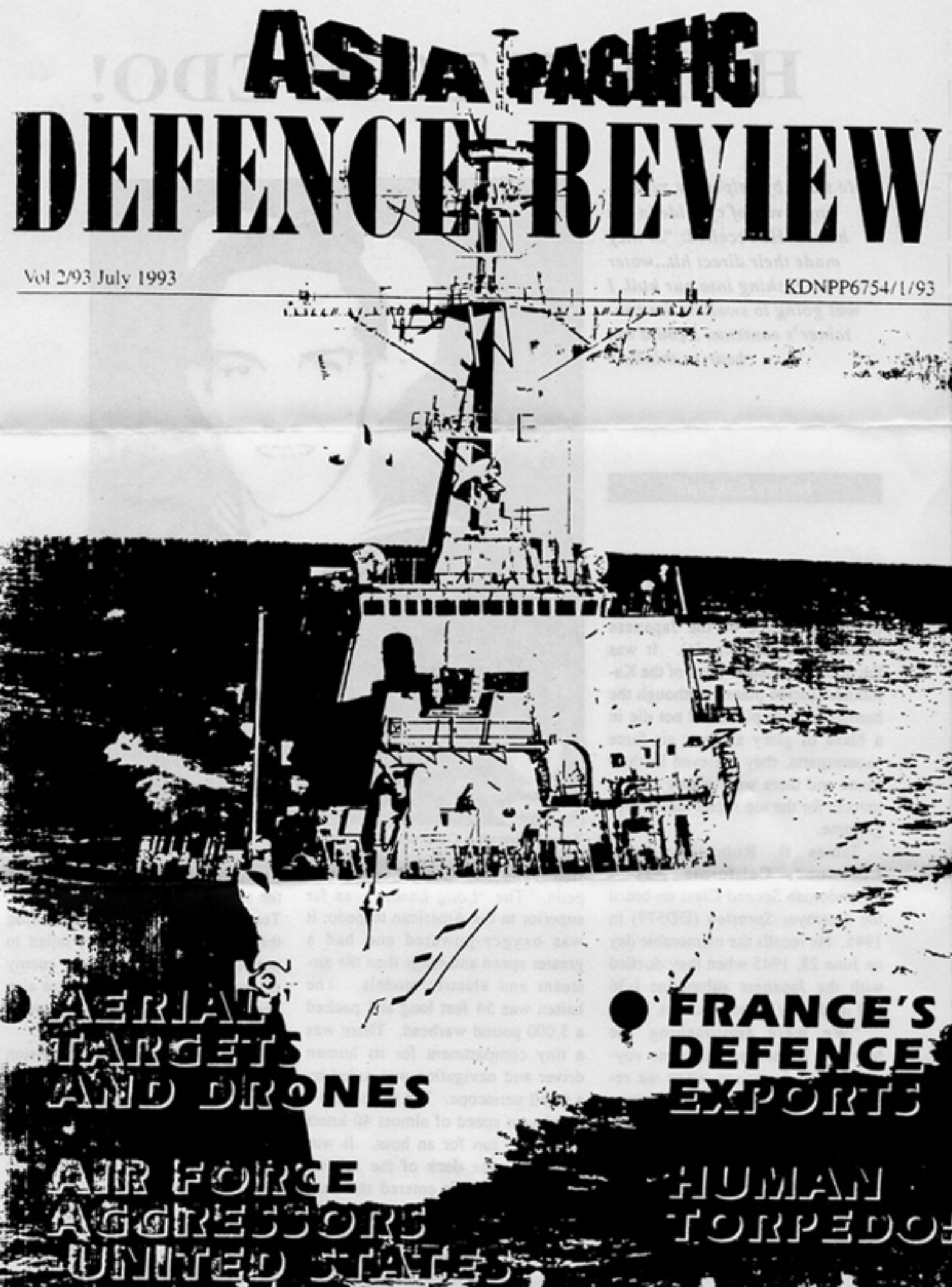


# ASIA PACIFIC

# DEFENCE REVIEW

Vol 2/93 July 1993

KDNPP6754/1/93



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TARGETS  
AND DRONES**

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UNITED STATES**

**HUMAN  
TORPEDO**

# HUMAN TORPEDO!

*He stood by helplessly, clutching a vial of cyanide in his hands. He recalled: "... they made their direct hit...water came rushing into our hull. I was going to swallow the container's contents. I could not bear to think..."*

## Henry Sakaida



*Torpedoman 2/C James B. Roberts*

**IN THE DESPERATE** final days of WWII, very few Americans knew of the existence of the Japanese "kaiten" (human torpedo). It was the underwater equivalent of the Kamikaze suicide plane. Although the human torpedo pilots did not die in a blaze of glory as their air force counterparts, they believed in their cause and there were plenty of volunteers for the top secret kaiten programme.

James B. Roberts, 69, of Lakewood, California was a Torpedoman Second Class on board the destroyer *Sproston* (DD577) in 1945. He recalls the memorable day on June 28, 1945 when they duelled with the Japanese submarine I-36 and its deadly cargo of kaiten.

"We were approaching the Marshall Islands on our home voyage to San Francisco when we received a distress call from troop transport," recall Roberts. "They were being stalked by a submarine and were firing at it."

The "submarine" stalking the troop transport was actually a kaiten, piloted by Lt. (jg) Nobu Ikeguchi. This suicide weapon was a modi-

fied Type 93 "Long Lance" torpedo. The "Long Lance" was far superior to the American torpedo; it was oxygen-powered and had a greater speed and range than the air-steam and electric models. The kaiten was 54 feet long and packed a 3,000 pound warhead. There was a tiny compartment for its human driver and navigation was aided by a small periscope. The kaiten had a maximum speed of almost 40 knots and could run for an hour. It was carried on the deck of the submarine and the pilot entered the craft through a hatch from the mother sub.

When the *Sproston* came on the scene, they immediately spotted the

periscope of the I-36. So intent was the skipper of the submarine, LCdr. Tetsuaki Sugamasa, on monitoring the attack of Ikeguchi, he failed to notice the approach of the enemy destroyer. His sonarmen were also negligent; they had their listening gear fixed on the kaiten.

The *Sproston* was on a collision course with the I-36. The skipper, Cdr. R. J. Esslinger gave orders to ram. Jim Roberts was in the stern and braced himself. He recalled: "We were getting up to maximum speed (35 knots). I knew that when we hit, there was going to be an awful impact and damage to both of us!"

"New propeller noises ! Very close !" yelled a sonarman to Sugamasa. The startled commander swept his periscope around and was horrified to see a monstrous black shape filling his entire view ! The *Sproston* was almost on top of them

"Emergency dive ! Emergency dive ! Take her down, 125 !" screamed Sugamasa. His crew bolted into action. Just as the *Sproston* reached the point of impact, the I-36 serenely slid underneath the bow. Men on the bridge of the destroyer looked down and could see the long, black shape of the Japanese submarine right underneath them ! They had missed by feet.

"We had originally set the depth charges for 50 feet" said Roberts. "There was no time to reset it, so we rolled off the 600 pounders off the stern and shot the 300 pounders from the K-guns. We busted our tail to get that sub !"

The depth charges detonated underneath the I-36. Had she been lower, the *Sproston* would have scored a kill. Petty Officer Yutaka Yokota, one of the six kaiten pilots, was undergoing a living nightmare. He described the attack of the *Sproston*:

"Then came the depth charges. They felt like a giant piledriver smashing into the side of the I-36. She shook and swerved, throwing me to my knees. The wardroom sofa leaped fully two feet above the deck and toppled over on its side. Every light that I could see went out, and only about half of them came on again."

The I-36 was literally being beaten to death and there wasn't any-



Petty Officer Yutaka Yokota

thing she could do. Oil and debris were seen on the ocean surface, but Cdr Esslinger wasn't going to fall for that old trick and he continued the attack. Conditions inside the I-36 were approaching terminal and they were running out of time. Although Sugamasa was a skilled operator, the human torpedoes on deck limited his ability to dive to the maximum 325 feet. He had to stay above 250.

Ensign Minoru Kuge rushed to LCdr. Sugamasa and volunteered to take his kaiten and counterattack. Sugamasa had grave reservations about the condition of the kaitens, but then, he had very little options left. A quick check by mechanics revealed that although the electric rudders were damaged, the craft could still be steered manually. Petty Officer Hidemasa Yanagiya insisted that he be given the chance to sortie, too.

Yutaka Yokota had been unlucky

so far. Mechanical failure on the temperamental kaiten had thwarted his two previous suicide missions. His craft was made inoperative by the *Sproston's* incessant pounding. This mission, his third, was a total write off. He stood by helplessly, clutching a vial of cyanide in his hands. He recalled :

"Once they made their direct hit, and water came rushing into our hull, I was going to swallow the container's contents. I could not bear to think of death by drowning or suffocation."

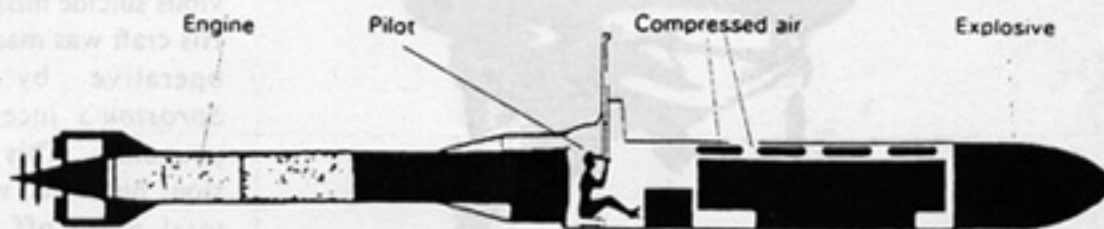
Kuge and Yanagiya quickly boarded their craft and were off. Sonarman and the skipper were glued to the

earphones. About 15 minutes later, they picked up sounds of several explosions, then a giant one. The crew cheered, believing that one of the kaitens had scored a direct hit.

The *Sproston* had spotted one of the human torpedoes as it made its run toward them. The small conning tower and periscope were clearly visible at quite a distance. The destroyer opened up with its big five-inch guns. "We made a direct hit and I saw the conning tower go sailing off into the air !" said Roberts.

Down in the hot and stale I-36, the crew heard more depth charges. The tenacious skipper wasn't about to call it quits. He wanted the I-36 very badly. The depth charge attack commenced around noon and lasted into the night. The *Sproston* unloaded its entire inventory of 56 depth charges. Finally, sonarman were relieved when the sound of the destroyer's propellers grew dimmer





**The Kaiten (Human Torpedo)**

and finally disappeared. Kuge and Yanagiya had sacrificed their lives in a desperate attempt so that the I-36 could live.

A badly battered I-36 limped back into port on July 6, 1945. Yutaka Yokota and crew were one of the very few submarines to survive the war.

Through the efforts of Don Roberts (Jim's son), the connection was made between the *Sproston* and the I-36. Don located Yutaka Yokota in Tokyo, Japan and the USS *Sproston* Association invited Yokota to their reunion in Orlando, Florida in September 1990. Yokota could not attend due to ill health.

best to sink you. But I am glad that we did not do so." This statement was read at Yokota's comrades, many from the kaiten programme and the submarine service, attended his funeral.

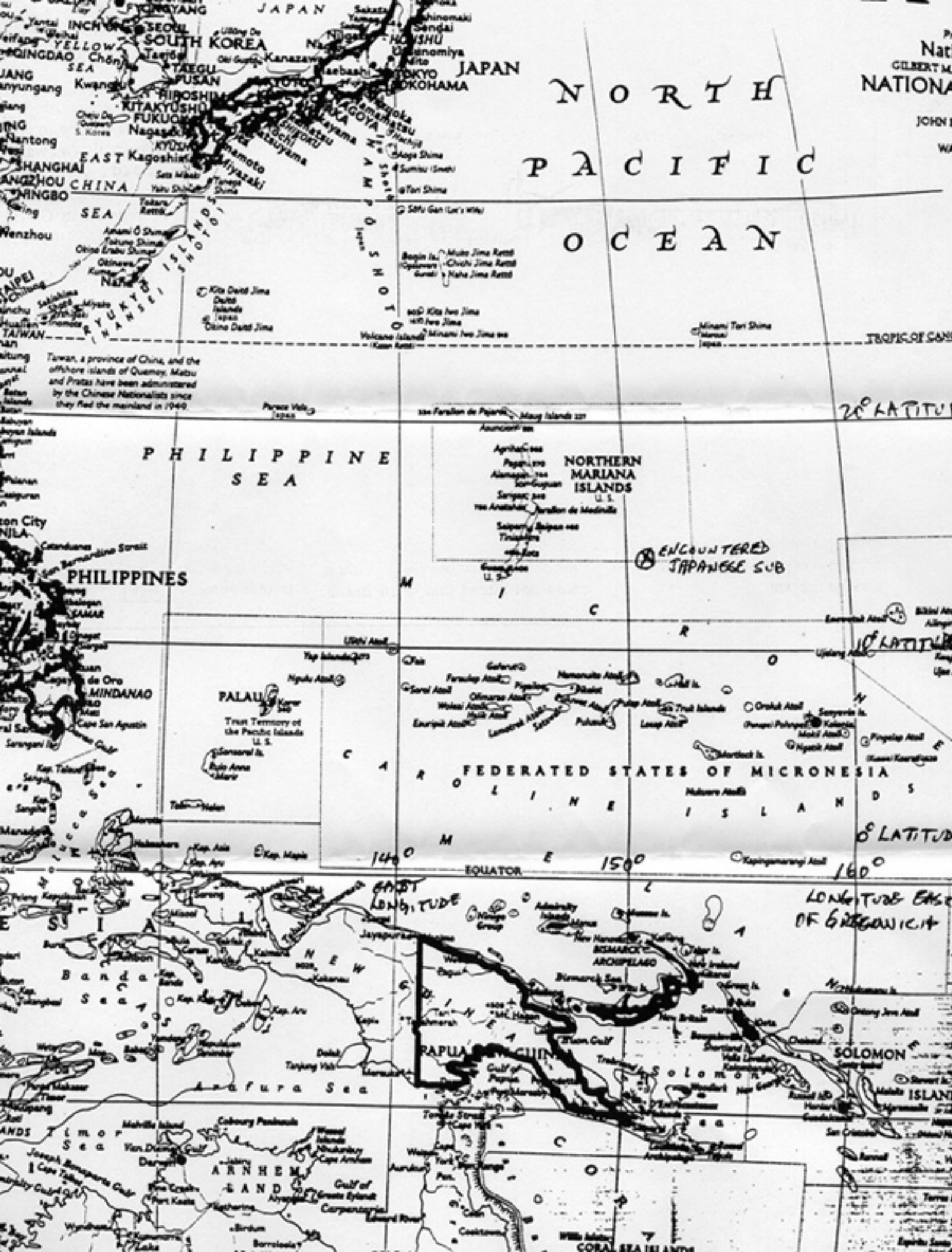
Said Jim Roberts, "I wish we could have met. We had so much to talk about." APDR

He had been looking forward to meeting some of the men who had nearly sent them down to the bottom. Another invitation was extended for the *Sproston* Association's 1992 reunion in Chicago, but Yutaka Yokota passed away on March 16, 1991 of cancer at the age of 65.

Jim Roberts had sent a letter to Yokota prior to his passing. In his letter, Roberts wrote: "We tried our



**The destroyer USS Sproston. It fought off the attack of two human torpedoes launched from the Japanese submarine I-36 on June 28, 1945.**



Nat  
GILBERT M  
NATIONAL  
JOHN I  
WA

# NORTH PACIFIC OCEAN

TROPIC OF CANCER

20° LATITUDE

## PHILIPPINE SEA

**NORTHERN  
MARIANA  
ISLANDS**  
U.S.

ENCOUNTERED  
JAPANESE SUB

0° LATITUDE

## FEDERATED STATES OF MICRONESIA

8° LATITUDE

EQUATOR

LONGITUDE BASE  
OF GREENWICH

Taiwan, a province of China, and the offshore islands of Quemoy, Matsu and Pratas have been administered by the Chinese Nationalists since they fled the mainland in 1949.

## PHILIPPINES

## MINDANAO

## INDONESIA

EAST  
LONGITUDE

## PAPUA NEW GUINEA

## SOLOMON ISLANDS

## ARNNHEM LAND

Wills Island  
CORAL SEA ISLANDS