

# ***The Battle of Midway***



**As eye witnessed**

**by**

**CDR Lloyd Jay O'Brien, USNR**

## Preface

During the Battle of Midway I was a junior officer on the destroyer USS Hughes DD 410 which was one of the escort destroyers for the carrier USS Yorktown. My battle station was in the five inch gun director. The gun director being the upper most station on the ship, gave me a good view of the action that took place around the USS Yorktown.

This account of the Battle of Midway is a personal account and is not a historical document.

*Lloyd J O'Brien*



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The dawn of June fourth 1942 broke forth with bright beams of sunshine flashing across the calm sea. The air was warm and the broad expanse of the sea stretched out to the horizon in soft blue. The grayish white clouds now streaked with brilliant pastel colors formed a welcome to the new day as the Yorktown's air patrol soared into the sky to search for the enemy.

The Yorktown force was one of two carrier task forces of the United States Navy, which were steaming North of Midway Island, waiting developments of reported Japanese Fleet Movement, proceeding towards Midway. The other, and larger force, was composed of two carriers: The Enterprise, Hornet, six cruisers and many destroyers. The two forces were separated, but kept in sight of each other to give mutual support in case of attack.

On board the destroyer *USS Hughes*, which was one of the escort vessels for the Yorktown, everything was ready for the action and all hands were prepared in Destroyer fashion, for come what may. The gun crews were eager for a chance to use their years of training, and many were sitting near their battle stations waiting for the battle alarm. There was little tension among the Officers and men because they had

read for many years of the inferior Japanese planes and ignorant pilots. Many months of rough duty in the North Atlantic, as escort for British convoys, had made them a hardy crew and they were confident, even cocky.

With the suddenness of death itself the rasping squank, squank, squank of the general alarm sounded throughout the ship, sending all hands to their battle stations; filling the ship with the sound of pounding feet on steel decks and ladders. The ship vibrated with a sudden increase of speed as she sped to take her protecting stations for the Yorktown against aircraft. Spray crashed over her bow, and a huge wake frothed at the stern, as her fifty thousand horse power engines forced her through the sea at high speed.

Sharp commands from the Officers were muffled in the wind. The main battery swung out into its standby position of readiness, while the machine guns were loaded and made ready. Signals of gay colors flapped in the wind and were hauled down. The very heart of the ship beat with a wild rhythm of the thrill of battle.

A report had been received indication the enemy was one hundred and forty miles northwest on Midway, and within striking distance of dive bombers and torpedo planes. The Yorktown turned into the wind and launched her attack group and fighter patrol. This was at eight fifteen in the morning. At one thirty in the afternoon the Yorktown reported on enemy aircraft carrier sunk. The good news spread throughout the ship and happy smiles of confidence beamed on many faces. It was realized, however, that the Japanese planes, not having a place to land, would follow the attack group back to our formation. The Officers gave last minute instructions to the men and the time of waiting commenced. Our attack group was sighted and the carrier maneuvered to recover them. It was during this operation that the enemy was sighted.

The sharp cry of the lookout spread the warning! Enemy planes sighted. It was now two o'clock in the afternoon. The ship shot forward with a final burst of speed to keep station on the Yorktown maneuvering at high speed to keep in the best possible position to avoid enemy bombs. The command to action rang through the battle telephone and the five inch anti-aircraft battery swung out on the target, while the machine guns waited for the range to close. Our fighters were engaged in dog fights with part of the eighteen enemy dive bombers approaching the formation. The planes which were trying to land on the Yorktown, when the enemy was sighted, turned away from the task force to clear the formation and gain altitude.

In the vicinity of the dog fights five enemy planes were seen to burst into flames and crash into the water. How the crew cheered at the sight.

The first enemy planes to come within range appeared over the formation and all hell broke loose. The Yorktown and her escort now steaming at high speed turned to avoid bombs. The anti-aircraft batteries of all the ships started blazing away at the same moment, filling the air with high explosive bursts. Two enemy planes over the Yorktown twisted in a spiral and disintegrated in the water after being shot down by the anti-aircraft fire. Four dive bombers were over the Yorktown and diving. The avenue of their dive was red with tracers from machine gun fire. The first Japanese plane to dive released its bombs and then burst into flames, descending like a great torch toward the Yorktown. The plane fell in the water close to the Yorktown, but her bomb hit and exploded on the forward part of the flight deck. The second plane came in at a very steep dive, and after releasing her bomb, dove straight for the deck of the carrier, but as she descended a stream of tracers seemed to cut her to shreds and the remains narrowly missed the Yorktown. The bomb pierced the flight deck near the island. The bomb from the third plane burst with a terrific flash on the side of the flight deck, and the bomb from the fourth was a near miss, falling astern of the carrier. The last two planes scuttled through the formation and one of them passed close to the stern of the *Hughes*. They were both shot down later by fighters. As soon as the enemy planes were out of range all eyes turned toward the Yorktown which was smoking heavily from her stack, and was dead in the water.

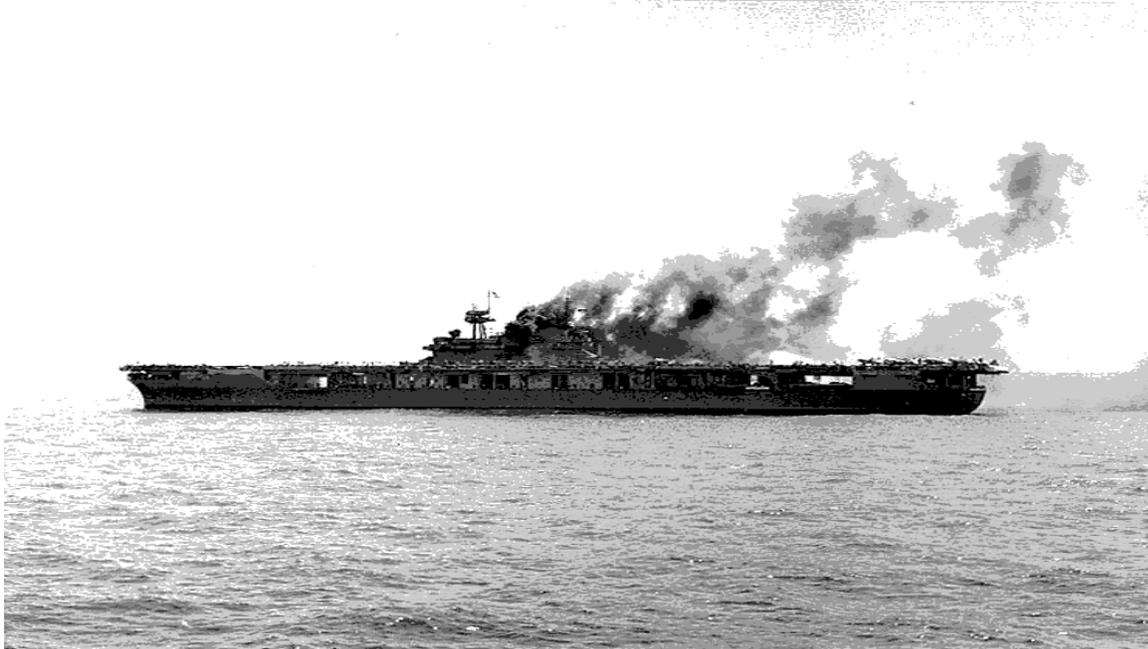


Photo # 80-G-32301 USS Yorktown stopped & burning, 4 June 1942

The cruisers and destroyers circled around the Yorktown, as baby chicks would a wounded mother hen. All hands waited for word as the extent of damage and wondered if she would sail under her own power again. A friendly fighter plane out of gas landed in the water alongside one of the ships in the screen, and the pilot was picked up. A little while later two torpedo planes followed suit, and their crews of three men each were picked up by ship.

At four fifteen in the afternoon the Yorktown was seen to gain speed slowly at first and then reach a speed of about fifteen knots. The escorting vessels formed a screen around her, as the crew cheered the sight of the carrier underway. The screen was soon joined by tow cruisers and tow destroyers from the other task force which had not been attacked. The Yorktown turned into the wind and commenced flight operations.



Photo # 80-G-312018 On board USS Yorktown after she was hit by dive bombers

At four forty nine enemy torpedo planed and nine fighters were sighted approaching the task force from opposite directions. The speed of the Yorktown was now greatly reduced from that of the first attack and her avoiding maneuvers were reduced accordingly. Our fighters swept down on the torpedo planes and the two Japanese planes hit the water. The remaining seven approached the Yorktown in a steep glide as anti-aircraft guns blazed away at them, blackening the sky with high explosive bursts. In spite of the curtain of fire in their path the planes kept coming to press home their attack. It was unbelievable that they could get through the anti-aircraft fire of the ships.

The planes soon reached the torpedo release point, and due to the slow speed of the Yorktown, she was unable to avoid all the torpedoes, and three of them hit her on her port side. The Japanese planes kept coming through the formation in an attempt to escape, but they were under heavy fire from machine guns. One of them burst into flame on the port bow of the *Hughes* and struck her under the water. Three passed ahead and one astern of the *Hughes*. Another crashed in the water on the starboard beam while the rest were chased by fighters and shot down.



Photo # 80-G-414423 USS Yorktown hit by Japanese aerial torpedo, 4 June 1942

The Yorktown was now listing about thirty degrees to port and stood still in the water. A signal showed she was being abandoned. Destroyers were being directed to close on the Yorktown and pick up survivors. This was about five o'clock in the afternoon.

The *Hughes* was one of the last ships to be directed to pick up survivors, and as she approached, the carrier boats from the other ships were already busy towing life rafts and getting men out of the water. The ships had rescue nets over the side and were maneuvering, so as to assist in the rescue. The courage of the men on the life rafts was an inspiring sight; all of them were covered with oil and many had blood showing on their faces and hands, but in spite of this they were smiling, joking, and yes, even singing. (None of them felt happy for they loved their ship and they had just lost their home.) They were making the American spirit. Even as the *Hughes* boat towed the last life raft back to the ship, there were Japanese planes in the vicinity and an air attack was expected at any time



Photo # 80-G-312028 Transferring survivors of USS Yorktown, 7 June 1942

With the last survivor out of the water, the *Hughes* was directed to stand by the Yorktown and prevent capture by the enemy. The remainder of the force steamed off in the shadows of dusk to seek the enemy, which now defeated, was retiring.

It was a tired group of Officers and men with drawn, sunburned faces and weary blood shot eyes that faced a long night of watchfulness.

As soon as it was dark, the men were allowed to leave their battle station keeping part of the guns manned. The rest of the men after short discussions on the days events, turned in for a much needed sleep.

The night was illuminated with the faint light of the stars and the only sounds were those of the swish of the ship through the water and thumping of the pumps on the Yorktown. It was ghostly night and the huge bulk of the Yorktown stood out in the darkness like a monument to the dead which lay on her decks. To the Officers and men the day had been like a wired dream and their nerves twitched with wakefulness.

At varying intervals a light would blink on the Yorktown's black shape. This

caused much discussion as to whether someone on the carrier was trying to signal for help. It was decided that the light was a battle lantern which was visible only when the ship was in a certain position.

It was past midnight when a dark shape moved in close to the Yorktown and with all guns manned the *Hughes* closed in to investigate the strange object. As the ship moved cautiously nearer the shadow shape disappeared, leaving the ships company with an even more uneasy feeling, and no idea of the identity of the object. Some thought it was a submarine while others believed it to be several empty life rafts but no one knew the answer to the question on everybody's mind.

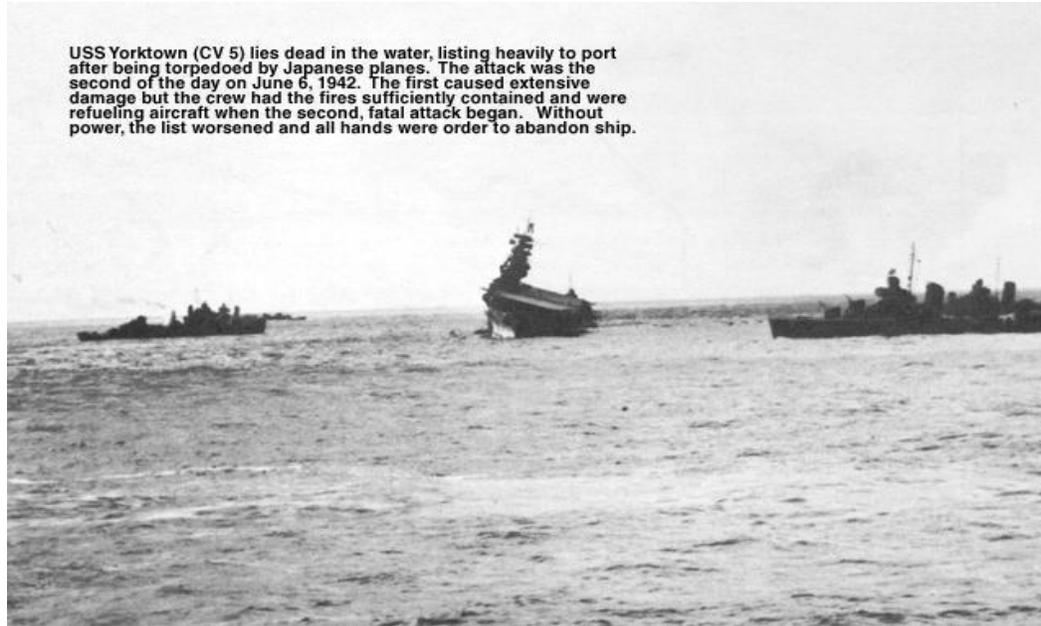
At five-ten in the morning all hands took their battle stations. The sea was calm and the sun came out bright. The water was filled with life rafts that had served their purpose and now floated aimlessly about the Yorktown. At eight o'clock in that morning a contact was made of aircraft and it was thought the Japanese were on their way back to attack the carrier. The contact was lost. Later that morning splashes were seen near the Yorktown and it was thought that objects were falling from her deck. Later the splashes were seen at a distance too far from the carrier to be falling objects from her decks and it was thought that they might be bombs from Japanese high level bombers but they were too small for that.

The ship moved in closer to investigate and a man was seen firing a 20mm gun to attract attention. As the ship drew near he could be seen standing on deck, his pants were rolled up and showed his legs covered in dark red blood. A party of several men and an officer were sent to rescue him. He told of another wounded man on the ship and the boat was sent back to rescue him and to investigate pounding noises down inside the ship. The second man was brought back to the ship and the men were told the noises were caused by objects on the Yorktown. The men who had made the trip to the rescue wore long faces and were full of tales of the dead which lined the passage ways and lay on the deck of the ship. This was about eleven in the morning.

A short time later a man was sighted in a rubber boat and the ship headed in that direction. It was first thought that it might be a Japanese pilot and men were stationed with Tommy guns at the ships side. As the ship drew near, it was seen that it was one of our pilots and wearing a smile from ear to ear, why shouldn't he after spending all night in a rubber boat and rowing ten miles to reach the ship? He was taken aboard and carried away to be dried and fed.

The pilot was no more than on board when a small tug was sighted which had

been sent out to tow the Yorktown. The tug was so small it didn't seem that she could ever move the Yorktown through the water but in less than an hour she was towing the carrier at three knots. While the *Hughes* circled them, acting as a screen against submarines.



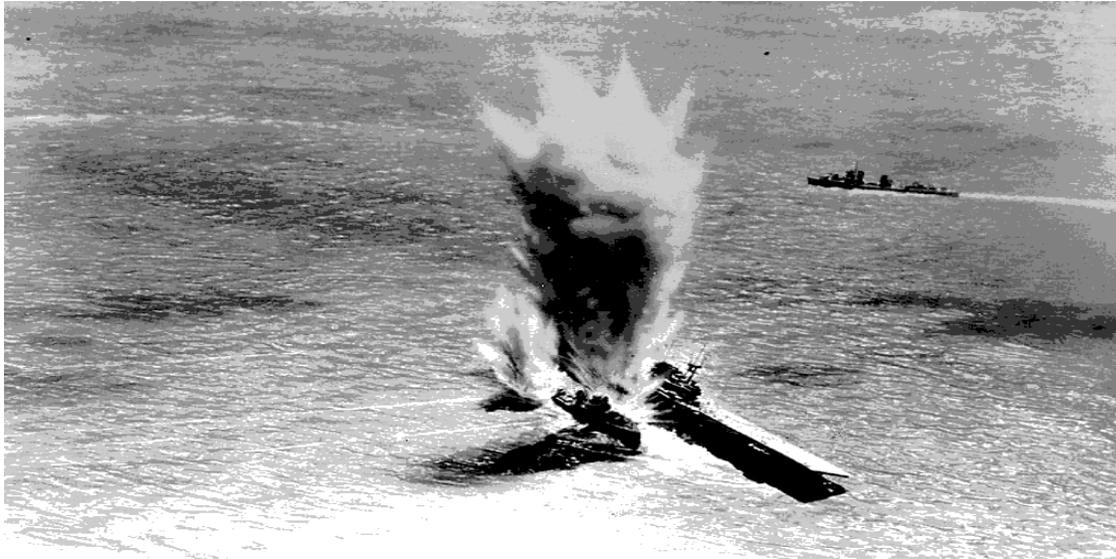
USS Yorktown (CV 5) lies dead in the water, listing heavily to port after being torpedoed by Japanese planes. The attack was the second of the day on June 6, 1942. The first caused extensive damage but the crew had the fires sufficiently contained and were refueling aircraft when the second, fatal attack began. Without power, the list worsened and all hands were order to abandon ship.

Most of the day, which was spent in routine screening until five forty three when two destroyers joined the screen, was uneventful even though enemy aircraft were reported in the area. The Yorktown was now listing about 30 degrees and at seven P.M. a jettison party was sent over to the carrier. The men could be seen throwing various objects over the side, but what little they could do until nine P.M. when they returned to the ship, didn't have much effect on the carrier. That night was spent without event.

During the early dawn of the next morning June sixth, three more destroyers joined the formation. One of these was the USS Hammann. Which shortly after joining the formation, went alongside the Yorktown to help in salvage operations. Yorktown survivors from the *Hughes* were sent to help on the carrier, all except the insured and a fifty five year old chief who begged to be sent with his shipmates, but it was thought due to his age, and the shock he had suffered that he stay on board. The Captain of the Yorktown had now returned to his ship and was in command once more. It looked as if the carrier could be saved, even though at its towed speed it would take over a month to get her into port.

All morning and early part of the afternoon things seemed to be going well.

The jettisoning party was doing a good job and most of the 20mm and 5inch guns on the side of the list had been dumped into the sea, and her list was now noticeably less.



At three thirty three P.M.. the officer of the deck sighted torpedoes speeding toward the Yorktown and the Hammann. The general alarm sounded and all hands manned their battle stations. Two torpedoes struck the Hammann and one or more hit the Yorktown. The Hammann began to sink at once bow first and in only one or two minutes was almost completely under water. Men could be seen jumping from her stern as she finely sank from sight. Seeing a large number of men in the water the crew thought most of the men were safe, but these thoughts were no sooner in their minds when the water where the Hammann sunk raised in a foaming brine, and a terrific explosion was heard. It didn't look as if any of the men in the water would escape being killed by the underwater explosion. The explosion covered an area as long as the Yorktown and was so intensive that it shook the *Hughes* violently over two and a half miles away. The carrier appeared to be unhurt and it was thought the Hammann had saved her.



Photo # 80-G-32320 USS Hammann sinking, 6 June 1942, seen from USS Yorktown

The screening ships that didn't go in to pick up survivors from the Hammann started at once to search for the sub. Many contacts were made and depth charges dropped but no evidence was seen that a sub had been sunk.

Just as the sun was setting smoke could be seen on the horizon in the west and the *Hughes* and another destroyer were sent to investigate. The two ships steamed off at high speed and soon could see the smoke coming from a Jap sub which was well out of range of their five inch guns. When the range had closed to about fifteen thousand yards the smoke from the sub stopped and it was thought she had shifted to electrical power and was going to submerge. As soon as this was noticed the ship opened up on the sub with her guns but the effect of the firing could not be seen because of the blinding gun flashes. The sub soon went under, but if she was sunk or not was not known. The Captain of one of the destroyers said he passed through a fuel oil slick which could have been made by ruptured fuel oil tanks on the sub. The search was kept up for some time but about midnight the two ships joined the screen for the Yorktown.

The next morning at daybreak the men on watch, while looking at the

Yorktown thought they noticed a little more list to the ship, but in the semi-darkness could not be sure. As it grew lighter more and more eyes turned in that direction and it was decided that the Yorktown was slowing settling in the water. She leaned over little by little and the increase in list was so slow that it was like watching the hands of a clock. The men who were stationed below decks were allowed to come topside to watch. Very little was said between the men and only an occasional order could be heard on the bridge. The flight deck of the Yorktown was now touching the water on the listing side and then the bow began to settle very slowly. It was some time before she was perpendicular in the water with her stern breaking the water. No one spoke as the stern slowly sank from sight leaving only a heavy coating of oil on the surface covered with floating objects. Each heart was gripped with grief, each face of these hardened sailors showed deep lines of strained emotion and most were streaked with tears from a hurt far inside of them. The Yorktown had sunk. It was Sunday morning June seventh 1942 in a calm sunlit sea that she went to rest. Two patrol planes circled the spot where ship they had been sent out to protect had disappeared, and then they flew off. The battle of Midway was over.

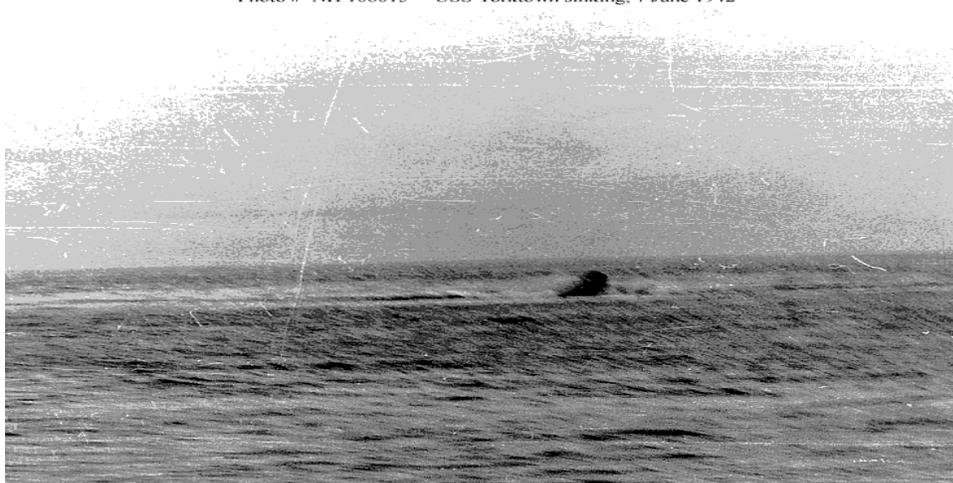
Photo # NH 106010 USS Yorktown sinking, 7 June 1942



Photo # NH 106012 USS Yorktown sinking, 7 June 1942



Photo # NH 106015 USS Yorktown sinking, 7 June 1942





**USS Hughes**

**(DD-410), 1939-1948**

USS *Hughes*, a 1570-ton *Sims* class destroyer, was built at Bath, Maine. Commissioned in September 1939, she was stationed in the Atlantic area prior to the U.S. entry into World War II, operating on training operations, Neutrality Patrols and, during the last part of 1941, "short of war" convoy escort duties in the north Atlantic. Soon after the [Pearl Harbor attack](#), *Hughes* was transferred to the Pacific, arriving there in late December 1941.

For much of the first part of 1942, *Hughes* served with the aircraft carrier [Yorktown](#). Though she was absent during the [Battle of the Coral Sea](#) in early May, she accompanied *Yorktown* in the [Battle of Midway](#) a month later, stood by the disabled carrier after she had been hit and abandoned, and was present when she sank on 7 June. During much of the [Guadalcanal campaign](#) that began in August 1942, *Hughes* worked with the carriers [Hornet](#) and [Enterprise](#), taking part in the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands in late October and the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal in mid-November 1942.

*Hughes* left the south Pacific in early 1943 and was sent to the Aleutians. She took part in two bombardments of Kiska Island during July and remained in that northern area until late August. Her next combat operation was the Gilberts invasion, during which she rescued many survivors of the escort carrier *Liscombe Bay*, sunk off Makin Atoll on 24 November 1943. In January-April 1944, *Hughes* continued to serve with escort carriers during the amphibious assaults on the Marshall Islands and Hollandia, New Guinea. Continuing operations off New Guinea until mid-September, she supported several more amphibious operations and escorted convoys.

In October 1944, *Hughes* took part in the invasion of Leyte and subsequent operations in support of the Leyte campaign. While participating in the Ormoc Bay landings in December 1944, she was badly damaged by a Japanese suicide plane and had to return to the United States for repairs. This work was completed in June 1945, and *Hughes* received a second assignment to the Aleutians, where she remained until fighting ended in August. She was briefly employed on patrol duties off northern Japan until mid-October. Her last active service was as part of the target group during the Bikini Atomic Tests in July 1946. Decommissioned a month later, USS *Hughes* was sunk as a target in October 1948.

