

Dr. Wassell's Boys

The Grim, Unsentimental Story of the Men Who Played in a Famous Drama

By EDWARD PINKOWSKI

IT WAS on the morning of February 6, 1942, that Bob Whaley, 24-year-old EM2c from Los Angeles, California, looked up from a stretcher and saw smack under the shadows of the cruiser HOUSTON along a rickety wharf at Tjilatjap, Java, several limping, bandaged members of his own ship. He saw other members of the ship's crew, including the HOUSTON's skipper, going around and wishing each casualty a speedy return to the ship. A young, strapping sailor finally turned to him.

"Good luck, Bob," he said, shaking the wounded man's hand and looking over his two-inch growth of beard. "Looks like you are going to need more than a doctor. You'll need a barber for that beard."

"Forget it," Bob assured him, as native litter-bearers came to carry him to the narrow gauge train that was to take him to a hospital at Djokjakarta, a small village in the hills of southern Java. "I'll be back with you on the ship within six weeks."

If he had bet his beard on that, he would have had to shave it off, for he never imagined that he would one day be one of the last American sailors out of Java with Dr. Corydon M. Wassell.

No, this is not a story about Dr. Wassell. Nor is it a story of his gallantry and courage in helping many wounded sailors get off Java before Japanese troops overran the island. This is a story of the sailors who were with him, their grim and unsentimental heroism, their pain and loneliness, and their realistic struggle.

One of the sailors—a cook's striker—was a tall, brown-eyed blonde from West

Lawn, Pennsylvania, and a battle casualty off the MARBLEHEAD. The doctors saw that he needed urgent medical attention. The upper part of his ear was torn off. His body was riddled with shell splinters, and his face was burned so black that it looked like a cake of cracked shoe polish.

In the film "The Story of Dr. Wassell," produced by Cecil B. DeMille, there's no mention of this cook's striker, a veteran of Macassar Strait. His name is Joseph R. Leinweber. This seaman of Austria-Hungary parentage, every bit of twenty-two and already five years of active service behind him, had seen enough of the wily Nips to make one feel that he had done his share of fighting. But not so with Leinweber.

"I don't want to get in the movies," he said. "I want to get back out there right now."

But this is getting ahead of the story. The inland hospital to which Whaley and Leinweber were brought by train was filled with similar cases of wounded men off the light cruiser MARBLEHEAD and the heavy cruiser HOUSTON. Many of them—forty-seven in all—had their skin shriveled off in the ungodly heat of battle, and the smell of burned skin was inexplicable.

Whaley found himself in a cot next to Bob Kraus, a towering, high-cheeked youth with brown hair from Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. Kraus was a coxswain.

Kraus came off the HOUSTON with appalling odds. He had been a trayman in the gunchamber of No. 3 gun mount. When a bomb hit the turret, his 6-foot-2½ inch frame was thrown against the rammer of an 8-inch gun. Shrapnel struck him in the back of the knee, leav-

ing a hole so big that you could stick your fist in it. His flesh was torn off to the bone.

As he struggled to get over the rammer, a pile of powder went up in his face. He tried to move, but the burns and shrapnel wounds were too painful. Then a second batch of powder went up in his face.

The next thing he knew someone found him hanging in the hatch. He was helped through and rushed to a first aid station. There the doctors found that he had a punctured lung.

Yet here he was, on the other side of the world from home, still fighting for life a few days later. At this time a young Javanese boy—he was so small that Americans called him Junior—came to wash his face. Kraus mumbled a few words to him.

The boy rubbed the sailor's ear.

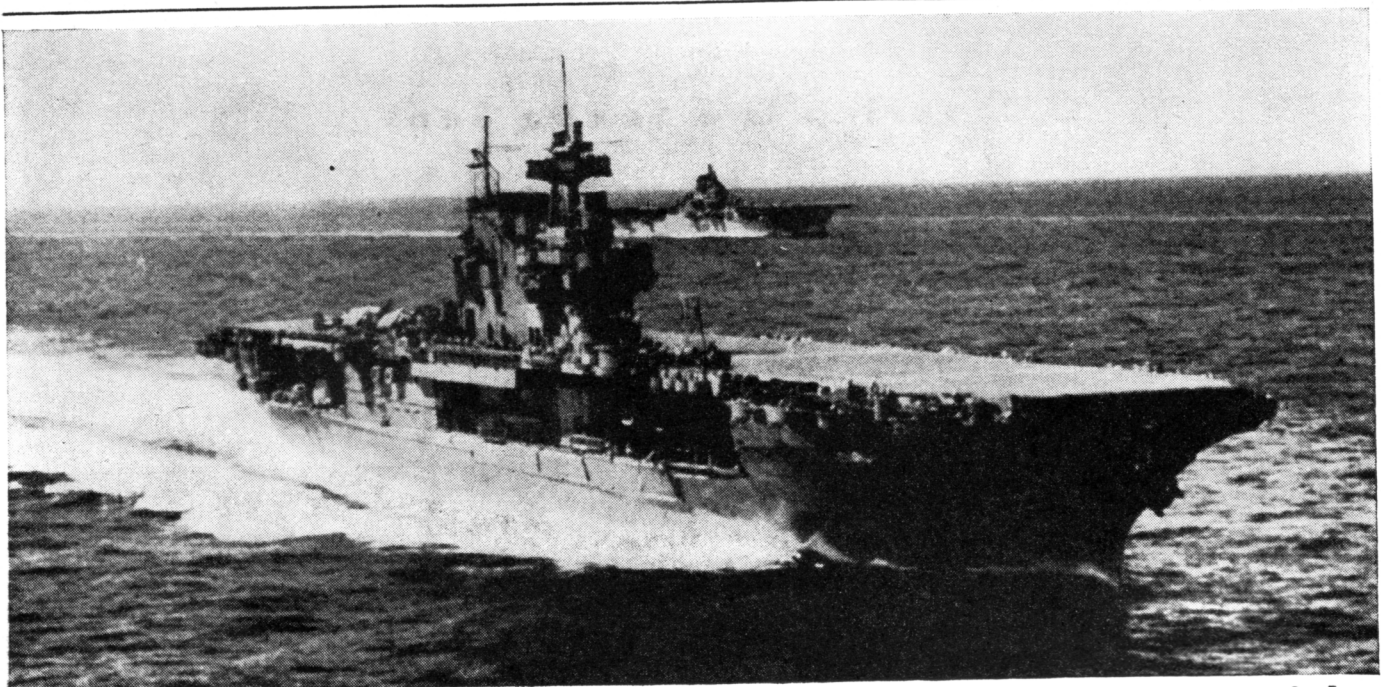
"Be careful," Kraus said.

"Saja tida mengarti," the boy replied, as he rubbed a wet cloth on Kraus' festering ear.

Kraus winced again. He was so mad that he was near crying. "Damn it, I told you to be careful of that ear."

Not understanding, the native boy grinned, and Kraus was about to throw a fit when a slightly occidental-looking nurse entered the ward. She explained to the boy in his own language that he must be very gentle on wounds.

Then she took an interest in this suffering sailor. He did not want to die, no matter how lonely and wounded he was. She stood constant vigil by his bedside and rendered to his needs. The sailors called her Boilermaker. But she was as kind a nurse as Kraus had ever met be-



The USS ENTERPRISE (foreground) and the USS LEXINGTON speed across the Pacific en route to a battle mission against the Japs.