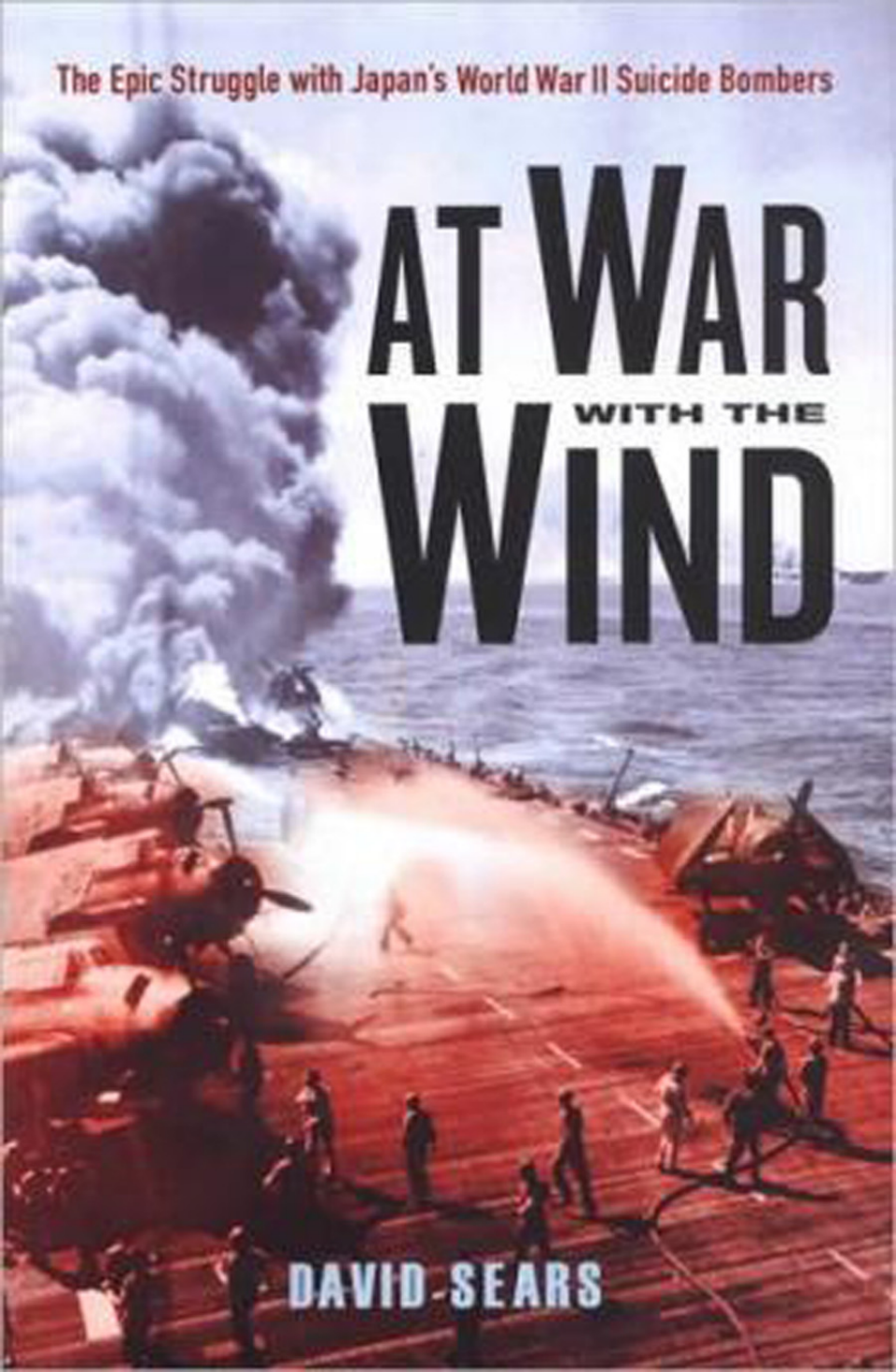


The Epic Struggle with Japan's World War II Suicide Bombers

AT WAR WITH THE WIND



DAVID SEARS

prospect of their first landing under fire. When Charlie Towers, 118's gunnery officer, got word the next morning that the "landing" was only a ruse, he, for one, was more relieved than disappointed.

While the elaborate sideshow roused no more Japanese response than did the real landings, the crowd of large ships lured *kamikaze* aircraft, one of which crashed transport *Hinsdale* (APA-120) while a second slammed the *LST-884*'s port quarter. 884 embarked a company of Marines complete with equipment, weapons, and ammunition, and the explosion set off a firestorm that quickly claimed lives and threatened 884's ammunition stores. As destroyer *Van Valkenburgh* (DD-656) rushed from a screening station to assist, 884's skipper ordered abandon ship, and survivors jumped directly over the side or into 884's own waiting Higgins boats.

By the time 118 and three other LCSs reached the scene, its crew had topside salvage pumps running and pressure to fire hoses on the bow. The groundswell and 884's exploding ammunition made it risky for deepwater ships like *Van Valkenburgh* to stay close. The LCSs were better able to ride the swells. Their skippers moved in, each from a different quadrant, determined to douse the fires.

As *LCS-118* stood off 884's starboard quarter, Charlie Towers could see water wasn't reaching the fire's core—the *LST*'s main hold. Towers urged *LST-118*'s skipper Peter Gilmore to hold the bow against *LST-884*'s stern while Towers took a fire and rescue party aboard. Gilmore agreed and Towers made for the bow to assemble the party. Once *LCS-118*'s bow and *LST-884*'s stern were lined up, Towers stepped across with his four-man salvage team close behind.

LST-884's deck was too hot for crawling and the air around too filled with explosive pops and ricochet pings to risk standing up. So the men ended up duckwalking single file, pulling the hose and its fog nozzle closer to the hold. As they moved, they could hear ammunition popping and feel the ricochet impact of some rounds hitting the underside of the deck at their feet. It seemed an eternity before Towers and his party could get close enough to put a good stream on the fire, but once they did, it took just minutes to get the blaze under control.

Sailors from other LCSs were now aboard *LST-884* as well, bringing more hoses and manpower for salvage work that steadily changed from dangerous to grimy and gruesome. Men who tried to get belowdecks

occasionally had to retreat as small ammunition caches continued to cook off and explode. *LCS-116*'s Ray Davis, who was wearing elbow-length asbestos gauntlets, worked in a line of sailors passing smoldering (and sometimes flaming) ammunition boxes and heaving them over the side.

Men who'd comported themselves bravely amidst fires and explosions were abruptly stunned and shaken at the sight of its human detritus: the charred remains of dead Marines and sailors. For the moment, Towers was the senior officer aboard *884*, responsible for deciding what to do with the corpses. Fires and explosions still seemed huge threats, so Towers instructed a few sailors to remove dog tags, weight the corpses with spare 20-mm gun barrels, and drop them over the side. Almost at once he regretted his choice—and, even more, his audacity in presuming he had the right to make it. It was too much like playing God. Several bodies were already over the side, but Towers had the remains of others moved to a piece of deck away from the salvage work. Let someone else more qualified decide.

A second demonstration landing was staged the next day, but already the invasion fleet's focus had turned to providing artillery support and moving cargo ashore. Combatant ships that had already lobbed over twenty-seven thousand explosive rounds on Okinawa began rotating call-fire shifts, coordinating with radio-equipped forward spotter teams to pinpoint and take out suspected Japanese strong points.

Cargo unloading, particularly during the first Pacific assaults, routinely backed up while Marines and GIs cleared fierce beachhead resistance. Now it was *Iceberg*'s uncontested landings that fouled things up. The bulk of L-Day's vanguard of sixty thousand troops was already well inland and outrunning supply lines. Cargo stacked up on the beach and delivery turnaround times ballooned as supply trucks went looking for their customers. The situation improved on 3 April, only to worsen again as high winds and seas kicked up and curtailed unloading on the 4th and 5th.

Iceberg's cargo and troop transports loitering off the beaches made particularly inviting targets, so most were sent to open water as darkness set in. Even this precaution wasn't foolproof. Two transports took suicide hits the evening of L-Day, and the next night at least ten *kamikazes*