

J. Lamont Norwood ~ WWII

Dear Mother...

When Lamont Norwood's letter reached his mother in Chatham County in November of 1942, she was undoubtedly relieved to hear from him. She must have held her breath, though, after reading his first few sentences...

Dear Mother,

I sort of hesitate to tell about my recent experience, because it may start you to worrying about me, but on the other hand I have to make some explanation for the change of address, and if I made up some story you might see that it didn't look like the truth and become really worried.

I am at a hospital now....

In the following three and a half pages, Lamont details the harrowing account of the sinking of the ship he was aboard and three days at sea on a raft before being rescued. You can read the letter below, thanks to its donation to the Chatham County Historical Association collection by Richard Whitfield.

Lamont's account is a personal one, capturing the thoughts and feelings of someone who was in the water for days and saw most of the others around him perish. Naval records give only the technical details of Lamont's ordeal:¹

On 12 October 1942, Lamont's ship, the *Vireo*, was underway as part of a convoy of several other ships, each pulling a barge carrying barrels of aviation gasoline and 500-pound bombs to the United States forces on Guadalcanal. Two days later it was learned that a Japanese carrier task force was in the vicinity and all ships except *Meredith* and *Vireo* turned back.

Meredith was sighted by a Japanese patrol plane on the morning of 15 October, and shortly after midday took aboard the 68-man crew of *Vireo* to depart the area at high speed. However, while preparing to torpedo *Vireo* to keep her out of Japanese hands, *Meredith* was attacked by a force of 38 bombers, torpedo planes, and escort fighters from *Zuikaku*. In the first three minutes of the attack, *Meredith* was struck by a bomb that exploded beneath her bridge, destroying all communications, steering control, and gun direction. A second bomb struck the forward port side, and a torpedo exploded below the ready ammunition locker, igniting the ship's pyrotechnics and setting fire to fuel oil leaking from her bunkers.

Meredith brought down three of her attackers, but she was struck by an estimated 14 bombs and seven torpedoes. *Meredith* rolled over and sank in 10 minutes. Of the crew of 273 on board that day, only eight officers and 73 enlisted men survived the attack and the three ensuing days of exposure to the open sea and sharks until they were rescued by *Grayson*, *Seminole* and *Gwin*. Lamont was rescued by *Gwin*.

Lamont's letter is reproduced in full on the following pages.

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Meredith_\(DD-434\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Meredith_(DD-434))

November 1, 1942

Dear Mother,

I sort of hesitate to tell about my recent experience, because it may start you to worrying about me, but on the other hand I have to make some explanation of the change of address, and if I made up some story you might see that it didn't look like the truth and become really worried.

I am at a hospital now miles out of the battle zone, and to tell how I got here will begin at the beginning.

First, I was not on the ship to which I was attached when I wrote last, and will not mention the name of the ship that I was on because of the censors, you know. Also because of censors I will not describe the battle, but will begin with the ship sunk and me out in the water, which was then covered with oil, with a life jacket on and Jap planes machine gunning us. As I watched the bullets hit around me, I noticed that they didn't splash much water. Just made holes like rain drops falling on a puddle or in the horse tub, only they were much larger. I noticed that the firing was letting up and looked up and watched the last plane come in. He was coming straight at me, but I could tell by the angle and height that he was going to shoot over my head (by a slightly uncomfortable margin). I watched him bank his plane beautifully, level off, and leave at a right angle from the one he came.

I made no effort to get on a life raft until the planes left. I knew my face and hair being black with oil, and the water being black too, would make it hard for them to see me if I did not move, while being on a raft or to start toward one would just make a good target for them.

After they left I started swimming for the nearest raft but found that I could make little progress in the oil slick, so I calmly and without hesitation pulled off my new shoes and let them go, then methodically unbuckled my belt and let my pants slide off. There was \$39.00 in my bill fold and a Parker pen in the other pocket.

I reached the life raft, and found that although it was in good shape apparently it had been banged around and the provisions lost. Soon we had about 25 men. Only one third to one half of us could get on at once, so we took turns holding on to ropes on the outside and swimming then resting on the raft. Two officers were badly burned and could not take their turn swimming. I had 5 morphine syrettes in my life jacket pocket so I doped them up and their last hours were made easier. They only lived a few hours. During the night a shark slipped up and bit a big chunk out of another officer. He yelled "shark" and everyone started to try to crowd on the raft which might have been our undoing but someone yelled for everyone to jump in and start kicking. Each of our first impulses at the word "shark" was to get on the raft and save our own hide, but when the fellow yelled to start kicking we saw that we had to do that or it would be nobody so we started splashing furiously and the shark left. We took the officer on the raft, and someone found a rubber tourniquet (where that came from is still a mystery to me). The bite was so high on the thigh that we couldn't tie the tourniquet but could tighten it above the bite and hold it in place. One of us held the tourniquet while another took his head in his lap to keep it out of the water. I knew he was doomed, for with the loss of blood, pain, and increased loss of body heat I knew that shock would be certain and fatal unless we were rescued at once and being found at night was hopeless. He lived about four hours which was about two more than I thought he would. The rest of the night we took turns kicking in the water. Three of us would kick for a few minutes and then three others take up.

About fifteen minutes before daybreak we saw a ship right near

and were about to start yelling madly but recognized it for a Jap sub. About 9:00 A.M. we saw a flying fort. Those on the raft waved their shirts and those in the water aplashed it furiously but he didn't see us. Later a Jap plane came over. We didn't wave at him as the most we expected it would do would be to remind him to get in a little machine gun practice. I recognized the plane as the type catapulted from Jap cruisers, which of course meant that there were Jap Cruisers in a hundred miles of us. I knew it meant no help soon for there is no spot big enough for Jap cruisers and our ships. I knew if we had ships in the area there would be a big battle and they could not send out to get us if we were discovered until the battle was over. I said nothing about what I was thinking for I didn't want to make anyone feel any more depressed than he was. Doubtless there were others who recognized the situation the same as I, but they said nothing either, for the same reason that I didn't.

I might say that we had made a sail of two shirts and tied to sail for the nearest land, but with the raft overloaded and as many more holding on the side we could make no progress. We knew we had no chance of making land. The nearest was a small island 80 miles away, which at that distance would be hard to hit if we had had navigating instruments which we didn't and could have made headway, which we couldn't. Trying gave us something to do though, and also a drowning man, they say, will grasp a straw.

I may add here that sharks tormented us throughout the trip. In the daytime we could see them come around, would splash water and they would go away.

By sunup next day we were pretty well spent, and knew our time was running out fast. A Jap plane came over and this time we waved at him. I think he saw us. We hoped they would send a destroyer out for us in the hope of getting information out of us. None of us knew anything much and intended to tell a lot less than that. We saw a flying fort that day but it passed at a wide distance.

At the time of day when we had been in the water about 48 hours without food or water some started to go mad. Others weakened and took a swallow now and then of salt water, which of course just hurried on the time that they went mad. Some were giving out completely physically. Our skin by this time was so water logged that almost anything would break and tear it. I had rubbed the skin off my stomach climbing over the edge of the raft. I was so sore that when it came my turn to get off and swim I would sit on the edge and fall off backward.

Some of the things I thought of were: I would not mind, in fact would like to be picked up even by the Japs for I would gladly give my life for a drink of water and something to eat. I remembered when I got so thirsty walking ~~Black Beauty~~ back from taking Black Beauty to Joneses and how good that pepsi-cola tasted when I reached that store, and thought about how good a pepsi or a lemonade would taste them. I considered that I hadn't much longer to live anyway and was so thirsty that I couldn't tell salt water from any other, and weighed the advantages of drinking my fill of salt water then allowing myself to drown quietly, against that of sticking it out to the bitter end. I thought that over several times, but each time decided that I would not give up; that I would indeed stick it out to the bitter end; and that if anyone got out alive it would be me. I did not consider drinking the salt water without ending it all immediately after. It did not seem that would be committing suicide, for it looked then like I was doomed anyway.

By night some more had died. At what I judged to be about midnight I decided that only one other than me was still sane. It was getting rough and looked as though the raft would be upset at any time. I got at one end and the other same one at the other and we tried to maintain

some order to keep the raft from being upset. This was impossible as everyone was out of his head. They were milling around, jumping over the side, climbing back, etc. We could all get on the raft at one time by now.

It looked as though the wind might bring rain. I pulled my under shirt off and wrung the salt water out of it. I intended to hold it up to catch the rain in it and then suck the water out of it. The rain did not materialize though.

First, now, I had better explain why you can't help from going mad when you get no water for days. You lose moisture from your body continually. Your blood gets dried. It starts canvassing your body for more fluids. It is not particular where it gets more fluids, so it gladly accepts that small amount it finds in the brain. After the brain is dried to a certain degree you go mad but not until the blood dries do you die. Doctors make use of the blood collecting fluids from parts of the body in treatment of certain head injuries where fluids collect under the scalp and cause pressure on the brain. They give repeated enemas of Epsom salts which dries the intestines and in turn the blood. The blood trying to make up its lost fluid takes up that which is collecting under the scalp, which of course is just what the doctor wanted to happen.

But back to the life raft. Some time between midnight and daylight I guess I went mad as I can remember little after midnight. I can remember in a confused sort of way that I was out swimming and a shark was after me. I would kick and he would go away but not far. In my maddened state of mind I thought if I pulled off my shorts maybe the shark would stop to nose around them and I could swim farther away. I can remember an airplane circling around over me but I could not reason what it meant. He dropped a flare and a huge column of smoke went up. Had I been sane I would have known that the flare was a signal to a nearby ship that he had found someone. In my state of mind I did not give the smoke a second thought or look. From the plane they threw me a rubber life jacket. So accurate was the one that threw it that it practically fell on me. I had not the strength to put it on, but had a sense or instinct enough to crawl up on it. The men on the nearby ship saw the smoke, rushed over, pulled along side, two men jumped over and got me. They got me on deck and had a stretcher there for me. My tongue and lips were so dried and burned that I could hardly move them so could scarcely talk, but I made an effort to tell them to take the stretcher back I would walk. Exactly on completion of the last word I passed out as cold as an Irish potato.

I was so far gone that I might have died anyway, but a smart doctor brought me back. He had a practice down in Georgia before signing up for the duration.

After they completed a job they had to do they returned to a port and I was passed farther and farther back from the active area.

Those on the raft were picked up. Someone remembered that three of us thought we saw land jumped off and started swimming for it, he could not recall however what time this happened. I think it was shortly before daybreak and I was picked up at about 10:00. Of the three only I was rescued. I don't remember a thing about the other two leaving with me or anything.

Of the 25 that started out on my raft only 8 or 10 of us came through. I was in my birthday suit when rescued. I guess I didn't put my undershirt back on and have explained what happened to everything except my shirt. I have no idea what happened to it.

You can't pay for your life in dollars, however if I should be in a good port and the ship that rescued me comes in, I will throw a big

party with no expenses spared for some on it who did most for me, such as the two who jumped over the side for me, the two pharmacist's mates who worked over me hours at a time, a cook and chief commissary steward who went to a lot of trouble trying to fix up something I could eat, (my mouth was so sore trying to eat was like pouring iodine on an open cut), and others. When the doctor returns to his practice in Georgia we will send him one of our choice hams or something, to remind him I haven't forgotten.

I thought I nearly had my strength back and yesterday saw some others throwing a football around, and joined them. I would start to run and my knees would buckle like they were made of rubber. I could trip over a match and fall. All in all I decided I wasn't as far progressed as I thought I was. Today I settled for a two mile walk. Tomorrow I will walk three miles.

My skin which was literally covered with little blisters and a rash from the oil and salt water and sunshine has cleared up nicely. I guess I had between fifty and a hundred cuts, scratches, skinned places, etc., most of which have cleared up.

Love,

The name of the ship that took the crew of the USS Vireo aboard, and then got sunk minutes later was the USS ~~Mark~~ MEREDITH.

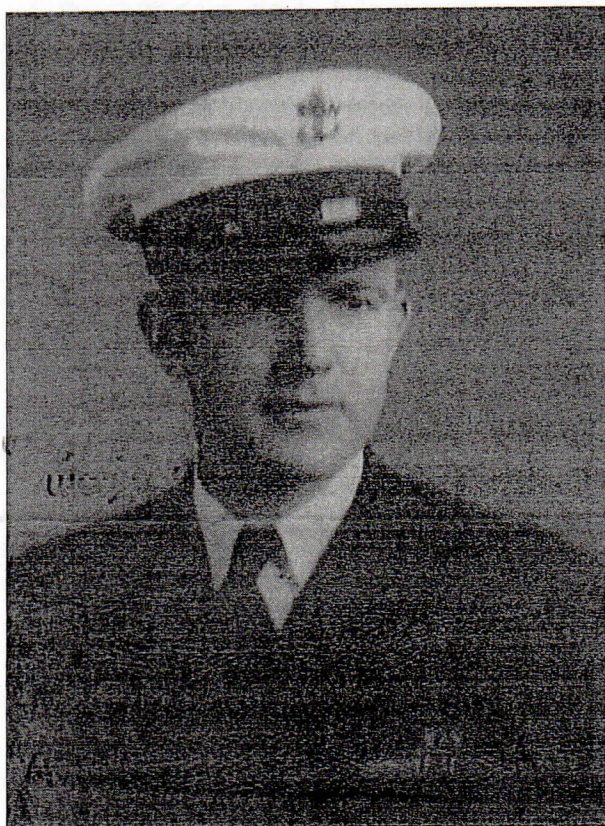
The name of the ship that picked me up was the USS GWIN. The USS GRAYSON picked up some other survivors of the Vireo and ~~MEREDITH~~.

James Lamont Norwood

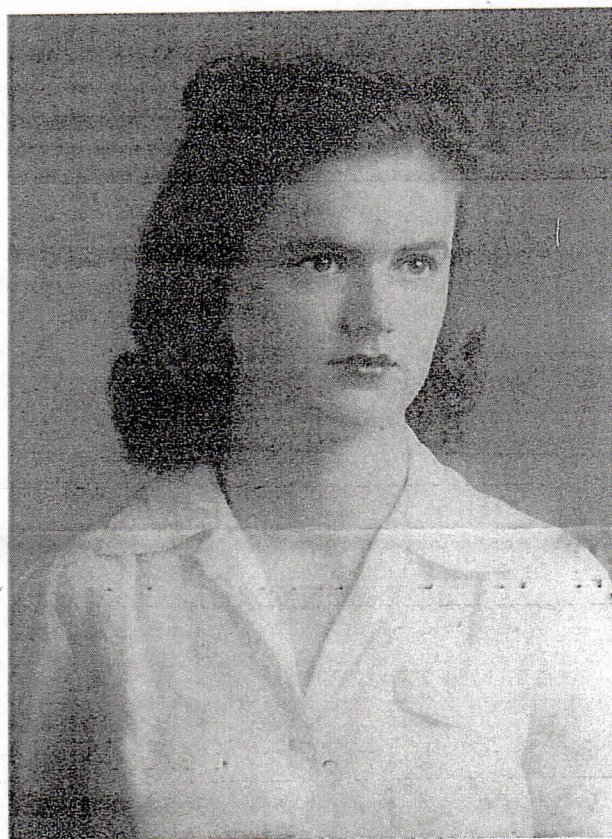
U.S. Navy PhM 2c

1916 - 2005

James Lamont Norwood was the son of James Alex and Kate Harris Norwood. Lamont grew up in the Mt. Pleasant Community in Chatham County. After graduating from Pittsboro High School he joined the U.S. Navy prior to World War II (picture below). He was assigned to the Pacific Fleet during the war and sailed for Hawaii in October 1941 aboard the USS Vireo. He survived the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and later survived a Japanese torpedo attack on his ship, after which he wrote his mother a letter from his military hospital (letter attached). Lamont married Blanche Whitfield (picture below) from the White Cross Community in January 1943. He was honorably discharged from the U.S. Navy and returned to Chatham County to own and operate a dairy farm.



Lamont Norwood



Blanche Whitfield