

Joe Padget and his ship, USS *Drexler*, were victims of kamikaze attack

Perhaps no World War II enemy was more feared by US sailors than the *kamikaze*. As Allied forces, led by the US Navy, tightened the noose on Japan in the spring of 1945, Japan's warlords unleashed waves of pilots who never intended to return from their missions. These pilots, usually poorly-trained, came to be known as the 'divine wind,' or *kamikaze*. On May 28, 1945, one such pilot crashed his airplane into the USS *Drexler* [see photo at right].

Joe Wise Padget of Saluda, SC was a graduate of Saluda High School. He was attending Clemson College when called into military service just two years after Pearl Harbor. He entered the Navy on December 4, 1943 and was assigned for training at Great Lakes, IL, Newport, RI and Norfolk, VA before shipping out to the vast Pacific Theater.



Kamikaze attacks began in October 1944 as the Allies made good on General Douglas MacArthur's promise to return to the Philippines. A series of tactical defeats and the success of the US Navy's submarine campaign against Japanese shipping had greatly damaged the enemy's capacity to wage war. Losses to the Imperial Navy's air arm had been dramatic, leaving the fleet exposed to the larger and rapidly growing US and Allied Navies.

Kamikaze aircraft were pilot-guided, explosive missiles, purpose-built or converted from conventional aircraft. Pilots would attempt to crash into enemy ships in planes laden with some combination of explosives, bombs, torpedoes and full fuel tanks. Accuracy was much better than a conventional attack, and the payload larger. In addition, a *kamikaze*, with no need to return to base, could sustain damage which would disable a conventional attacker and still achieve its objective.

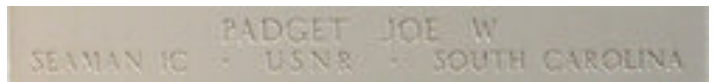
By the time Seaman First Class Joe Padget reached the Pacific, the tide was running strongly in favor of the Allies, yet there was much hard fighting still ahead. The *Drexler* departed Ulithi in the Caroline Islands on March 27, 1945 bound for the invasion of Okinawa. Joe and the *Drexler* supported the April 1 landings on Okinawa, the first of the Japanese home islands to be invaded by US forces. The *Drexler* was assigned radar picket duty, acting as a forward early warning outpost for the invasion fleet. Its job was to detect, attack and report enemy aircraft, submarines and ships and keep them from reaching the main body of the fleet consisting of aircraft carriers and troop transports.

Kamikaze attacks reached a peak during the Battle of Okinawa. Waves of planes made hundreds of attacks. At Okinawa, *kamikaze* attacks focused at first on Allied destroyers on picket duty, and then on the carriers in the middle of the fleet. Suicide attacks by planes or boats at Okinawa sank or put out of action at least 30 US warships and at least three US merchant ships, along with some from other Allied forces. More than 1,400 enemy planes were involved. Many warships of all classes were damaged, some severely, but the picket destroyers and other vessels did their duty: no aircraft carriers, battleships or cruisers were sunk by *kamikaze* at Okinawa.

On 28 May at 0700 hours, *Drexler* was on station when two *kamikazes* attacked. The first was downed by the combined fire of the *Drexler*, sister ship USS *Lowery* and US planes from the combat air patrol. The second tried to crash onto *Lowry* but missed, hitting *Drexler* instead and cutting off all power and starting large gasoline fires. Despite the heavy damage, *Drexler* kept firing, aiding in shooting down three planes which attacked immediately after the crash. At 0703 *Drexler* was hit by another aircraft, a twin-engine bomber. The impact caused *Drexler* to roll on to her beam ends. According to a surviving crew member, she sank in 49 seconds. Of the 138 officers and crew who survived, most were on deck at the time of the attack. Unfortunately, Joe Padget was not among them.

The State newspaper reported that “Young Padget was well liked by the young as well as the older people of [Saluda]. The announcement [of his death]...brought sadness to many.” Joe Padget was survived by his parents and two sisters.

Joe Wise Padget was awarded the Purple Heart and is memorialized at the Courts of the Missing, Honolulu, HI and at Clemson University’s Scroll of Honor.



Joe Padget’s sacrifice was among the thousands that helped lead the United States and its Allies to ultimate victory in the Pacific. It is a reminder that freedom is purchased only at heavy cost; and that it must be vigilantly guarded.

