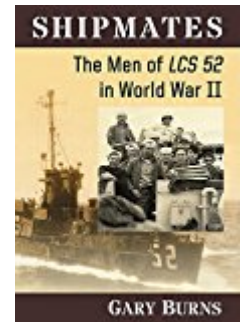


Gary Burns. *Shipmates: The Men of LCS 52 in World War II.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2016. 272 pp. \$39.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4766-6687-7.



Reviewed by Christopher N. Blaker

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

During the latter half of the Second World War, the US Navy significantly expanded as American production capabilities at last caught up with the fleet's needs to conduct a two-ocean war. Among the many new ships joining the fleet were small LCS (landing craft support) gunboats designed to support island-hopping campaigns in the Pacific. Nicknamed "mighty midgets," those vessels were able to maneuver within a hundred feet of a landing beach and support operations ashore with powerful 40mm, 20mm, and .50 caliber guns.

Gary Burns's *Shipmates: The Men of LCS 52 in World War II* follows the storied history of one of those gunboats assigned to the Pacific theater from 1944 to 1945. *LCS 52* participated in the assaults on both Iwo Jima and Okinawa in early 1945, providing close gunfire support for the American landings during the final stages of World War II. The book is aptly titled. Though the author does a fine job of illustrating the ship's service and combat record, he focuses most of his narrative on the crew members themselves. Com-

binning elements of military and social histories, Burns expertly weaves together a web of short, intermingling biographies of the men of *LCS 52*. In doing so, he highlights their remarkably diverse backgrounds and explores how they came together to form a competent, cohesive team at sea during the war.

The author frequently focuses on the prewar lives of men aboard, noting that geography divided the men more than age or ethnicity. They identified as midwesterners, southerners, easterners, and westerners, and they saw clear divisions between rural and urban settings. But in spite of those differences, the men had little trouble setting aside their differences to work together, for each shared a uniquely American upbringing during the twenties and thirties that taught the importance of responsibility, accountability, and community. Some of the men served with the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression, which allowed them to see how teamwork and purpose could alleviate extreme hardship. Considering the era, it was interesting that

the crew did not mind being integrated. White and African American sailors got along well both at sea and in port, leading the author to question whether racial tensions among individuals escalated more during times of peace than of war.

Burns focuses, too, on how the men dealt with the pressures of serving on a combat vessel. Life aboard ship for commissioned officers, petty officers, and seamen is explored, as are the roles that individuals played in maintaining a clean and effective fighting ship. Between operations, many of the men were educated in new technologies, such as radar machines, navigational instruments, and offensive armaments, which would serve them well in the postwar world. In combat, the crew faced many horrors of modern warfare firsthand. Three “apocalyptic scenarios” hung over their heads through the entirety of their service aboard *LCS 52*—sinking, going overboard, or catching fire. The men were haunted by the carnage they witnessed on the black-sand beaches of Iwo Jima and later experienced shattered nerves after enduring a series of desperate, deadly Japanese kamikaze attacks off Okinawa.

The postwar period is also featured in *Shipmates*, as the crew members returned home to employ their newfound skills and ambitions in the civilian world. Many went to college on the G.I. Bill, and some established successful business practices. In addition to providing satisfying postscripts of the men of *LCS 52*, the author also offers an epilogue for the ship—after being loaned to the Japanese Navy, ironically enough, during the 1950s, *LCS 52* was ultimately sunk by US guns in December 1958.

As a former marine, the author displays a substantial degree of pride and respect for naval men and their ships. Burns relies chiefly on primary sources to tell the sailors’ stories, referencing diaries, letters, and photos saved from the war years, as well as interviews with veterans who are still alive and individuals who knew those who are not. The inclusion of high-resolution images—

including official navy photographs and personal snapshots acquired from a crew member’s private camera—helps readers better visualize the well-armed gunboat on which much of the story takes place.

Finally, the end of *Shipmates* features an impressive appendix that offers a detailed list of the names of as many men who served aboard *LCS 52* during its service as are available. Burns’s painstaking research affords even more information than what was provided in the narrative, including a man’s rank, service number, dates of birth and death, and job on the ship. A short summary of prewar and postwar experiences is also included for many. The author includes in this crew list three groups of men—original officers and enlisted sailors, replacements who came aboard during the war, and those who boarded after the Japanese surrender.

World War II history buffs and those interested in twentieth-century military, social, and cultural history will find Burns’s work to be a comprehensive and satisfying read. There is, too, a more urgent obligation that the book addresses and ultimately achieves. With so many veterans of the Second World War passing away each day in the twenty-first century, *Shipmates* accomplishes the purposeful goal of compiling an impressive collection of combat biographies and offering them to the public. The author has effectively immortalized the memories of *LCS 52* and its fighting crew forever.

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