

# VOICEOVERS

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## BOMB SQUADS



**RED GLARE:** This remarkable image of target practice in progress was shot by John Schram from the Eastham shore.

By Cynthia Blakeley

**N**amed after a Confederate general, the *James Longstreet* was a World War II cargo hulk anchored on a high sandbar in Cape Cod Bay, two miles west of Eastham's First Encounter Beach. For decades it was one of the most recognizable sights on the Cape horizon, until nature finally wore it down and made it vanish.

But nature had plenty of help: Pilots from Otis Air Force Base used the rusting *Longstreet* to practice-bomb enemy ships.

Summer evenings, my sisters and I would climb toward the top of a pine tree on a rise in our yard and watch red dummy bombs slide through sunset, ears cocked for hits. Our crow's nest, high above a privet hedge bordering LeCount Hollow Road, was a strategic location for launching our own missiles. This was when cars had license plates front and back, and we could spot an out-of-stater as soon as it crossed the

railroad tracks. The fancier the passing car, the more likely we'd let fly a pine cone to bounce off rust-free metal speeding toward the beach. "Tourists, go home!"

My older brother David and his buddy Dennis volleyed their missiles out of one-inch galvanized pipes stuffed with wadding, gunpowder, and king-sized marbles. Hiding by the sandpit, they could take the paint off a car with a single shot.

Their supply depot was Camp Wellfleet, an anti-aircraft training base for the U.S. War Department near the old Marconi station, just a short hike through the woods.

"I loved that camp," recalls David. "It had everything we needed. We'd steal big artillery rounds, three foot long, and extract the gunpowder to make cannons and firecrackers.

"Dennis and I were fooling around in the garage one day, prying the head off a 90-millimeter round with a pipe wrench and a hammer. Dad came out there and liked to have a heart attack. He called Camp Wellfleet and said, 'I got two stupid kids here trying to take the head off an artillery round.'

"The bomb squad come out in no time,  
**BOMBS,** continued on next page



**BOMBADIER:** The author's brother David Eaton, as he looked in the bombing run days.



**ONE BIG TARGET:** The bow of the *Longstreet* as it looked about 15 years ago -- including plenty of ammunition holes.

File photo/Barry A. Donahue

**Camp Wellfleet housed something even more thrilling than artillery rounds: Radio Controlled Aircraft Targets, launched by steam catapult off the dunes at Marconi, just up the beach from Maguire's Landing at the end of our street.**

**They were considerably harder to steal than rounds -- but David and Dennis got one.**



**BREAKING UP:** The target ship had lost its distinctive profile by the 1990s, but still stood high above the waterline. File photo/Barry A. Donahue

## Bombs

continued from previous page

saying, 'You don't know how close you come to blowin' this place up.' The Judge Advocate swore next time we'd do time."

Camp Wellfleet housed something even more thrilling than artillery rounds, and considerably harder to steal: RCATs, Radio Controlled Aircraft Targets, launched by

steam catapult off the dunes at Marconi, just up the beach from Maguire's Landing at the end of our street. The drones had a 12-and-a-half-foot wingspan and were powered by a 50-horse, air-cooled motor. They flew out over the Atlantic, while artillery gunners on the bluffs popped them out of the sky. Once hit, the drones opened a parachute and dropped to the ocean. A

boat from Provincetown picked up the carcasses and carted them back to Camp Wellfleet to be rebuilt and shot down again.

Unless David and Dennis got one, that is. Twelve years old, they spent hours, days, watching and waiting. On a cloudless afternoon booming with artillery fire, the boys spotted a drone drifting off-course over the trees toward Long Pond. The race was on.

Taking the direct route by foot through the woods, David and Dennis out-ran the military. Using saws, pulleys, and ropes – the contents of Dad's state truck – they removed the wings and dragged the drone back to our garage.

They talked about how they would rebuild it, add a couple of seats, put on some wheels, and taxi down LeCount Hollow for take-off. Big time. Once they had the parts assembled, though, Dennis turned quiet and, looking at the dented metal, said, "I don't think this is such a good idea."

David's shoulders fell.

"Maybe we oughta just make a bomb out of it, and see if we can blow up the target ship."

The boys huddled in the garage for weeks. They pilfered my father's toolbox and knew where to turn for explosives: Howie Dykeman.

Aunt Ruth Anne's second husband was an avid hunter who reloaded his own shotgun shells and amassed a huge gun collection. It took several trips to Howie's basement and a good

bit of schmoozing, but David and Dennis managed to finagle 15 pounds of black powder.

They ripped a starter out of an old Ford motor, rigged a drive shaft from a piece of copper pipe, stole a propeller from one of my father's outboard motors, and hooked up a 12-volt battery. "Garage engineering," David called it.

They drove a rat-tail file into the side of a paint can and poured in the explosive, sealing it tight. When the torpedo hit the side of the ship, the file would spark and set off a blast of powder. Or so the theory went.

On the Fourth of July, when most people were in town center watching the parade, David and Dennis lugged the heavy torpedo down LeCount Hollow Road toward the intersection with Route 6 and Blackfish Creek, the closest launch into the bay.

Grunting under the weight of their lopsided cargo, David tripped half way across the highway. The torpedo struck hard against asphalt. The file sparked. Sudden heat sent the boys running.

There was no explosion, but a fire raged hot enough to burn a hole the size of a dining room table in the center of Route 6. David and Dennis fled onto a woodsy hill across the highway. Lighting White Owl cigars stolen from the General Store, they leaned against a pine tree and celebrated as sirens cut the air. ▼



**DISTINCTIVE PROFILE:** The target ship in 1978 was a signature piece of Cape Cod.

Photo courtesy of Noel Beyle