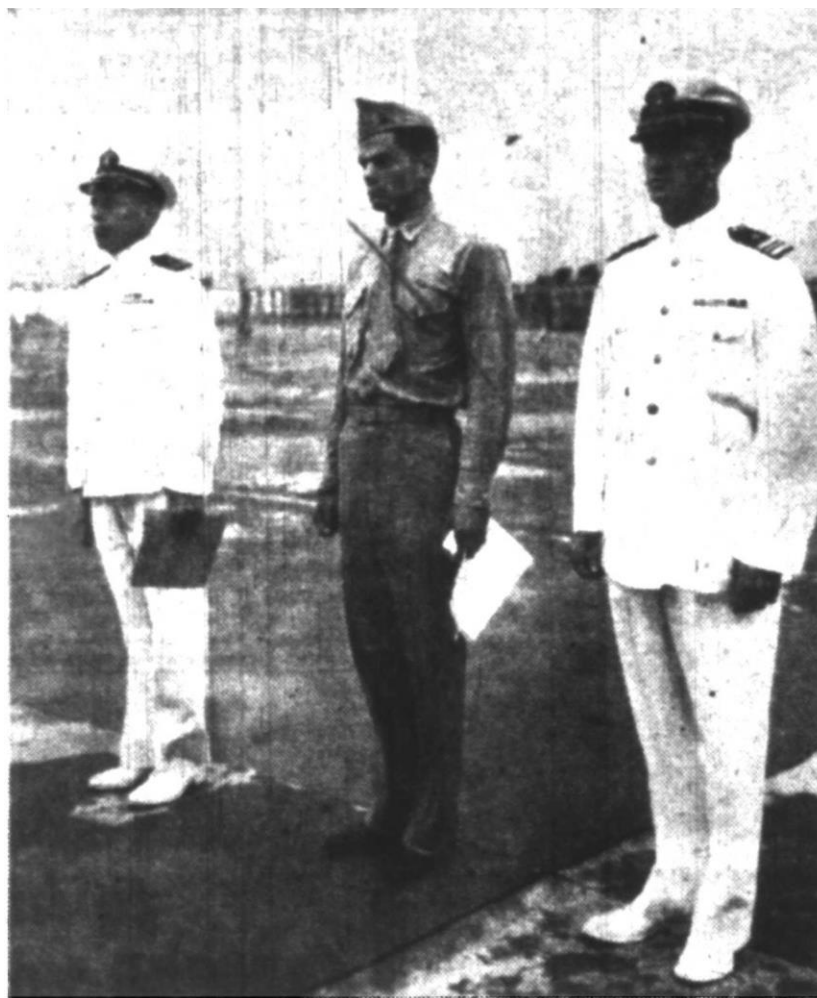


1945 August 13-19

Saved by a Cup of Coffee

8 — THE LA CROSSE TRIBUNE, SUNDAY MORNING, AUGUST 19, 1945 —

Felton, Communications Officer On Franklin, Gets Citation, Medal From Admiral Mitscher



—U. S. Navy Photograph

Receiving U. S. Awards at the Ottumwa, Ia., navy air station were Lieut. (jg) John G. Felton, Jr., son of Mr. and Mrs. J. G. Felton, La Crosse; 1st Lieut. Robert E. Dunk, U. S. marine corps; and Lieut. Comdr. Thurman Ward, U. S. navy.

(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 August 19, page 8)

This week's newspaper articles include a story about a naval officer from La Crosse, Lt. **John G. Felton, Jr.**, receiving one of the highest medals that can be bestowed for bravery. "Franklin" in the headline refers to the aircraft carrier *U.S.S. Franklin* which is known for having gone through one of the most horrific experiences of World War II. "Big Ben" suffered [more damage](#) than any other aircraft carrier that survived the war.¹ How did a man from La Crosse end up being part of this tragedy, and why can it be said that a cup of coffee saved his life?

Felton's father, John G. Felton, Sr., was born in Philadelphia and graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a degree in electrical engineering in 1909. His early jobs were in the utilities industry in Philadelphia; Gloversville, New York; and Charleston, South Carolina. In 1920, he came to La Crosse to be the manager of the Wisconsin-Minnesota Light and Power Company. Northern States Power purchased Wisconsin-Minnesota Light and Power in 1925, and Felton stayed in La Crosse as the district manager for Northern States Power until his retirement in 1950. He and his wife lived at 2607 Cass Street. They had two daughters and two sons---one of the sons being John G. Felton, Jr.²

John G. Felton, Jr., was born in Gloversville, New York, but spent most of his childhood in La Crosse. He climbed the bluffs, and his family took long weekend drives around the area. He was active in the YMCA and the Boy Scouts. While becoming an Eagle Scout, he learned semaphore and Morse code.³

John G. Felton, Jr., continued his education after high school. He graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1936.⁴ His degree was in electrical engineering.⁵ He then went to graduate school at the University of Iowa at Iowa City.⁶ Felton earned a Master of Arts degree from the University of Iowa in 1938.⁷ His degree was in stage lighting. It was at the University of Iowa that he met his future wife, Winifred Gross.⁸

A short time after graduating from the University of Iowa, Felton married Winifred Gross of Oberlin, Ohio, on August 14 at Yankton, South Dakota. The newspaper article announcing the marriage noted that the bride's parents had recently died, so the wedding was "a very quiet one."⁹ Winifred's mother had died in March 1938, and her father died on July 23 the same year.¹⁰ John and Winifred would have two children,¹¹ one of them a son named John G. Felton III.¹²

Felton then started his career as a teacher at [Morningside College](#) in Sioux City, Iowa.¹³ He taught speech and dramatics there, plus summer school theater at the University of Iowa from 1938 to 1942.¹⁴ His wife was also a teacher at Morningside College.¹⁵

As with so many lives during this era, his career was interrupted by World War II. Felton entered the United States Navy in March 1943. He left the United State in October that year. His wife and children lived in Oberlin, Ohio, while he was overseas.¹⁶



(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 June 10, page 3)

The Navy assigned Felton to the Pacific Theater. He was in the Gilbert Islands as a communications officer for naval air bases for six months before being transferred to an admiral's staff.¹⁷ He spent time on the aircraft carrier [U.S.S. Wasp](#). Then Lt. Felton was a communications watch officer on the staff of Rear Admiral [Ralph E. Davison](#), who made the aircraft carrier [U.S.S. Franklin](#) his flagship.¹⁸

The [Franklin](#) (CV-13) was one of 19 large, fast Essex-class aircraft carriers launched during World War II. The 820-foot long, 93-foot wide *Franklin* set sail on October 14, 1943. These aircraft carriers normally carried 36 fighters, 37 dive bombers, and 18 torpedo planes, but there were often as many as 100 aircraft operating from the Essex-class aircraft carriers.¹⁹ This warship required a crew of 3,500 men.²⁰ The Essex-class aircraft carriers were the core of the United States Navy fleets and task forces that conducted operations in the Pacific Theater during World War II.



U.S.S. Franklin (CV-13)

(Historycentral.com)

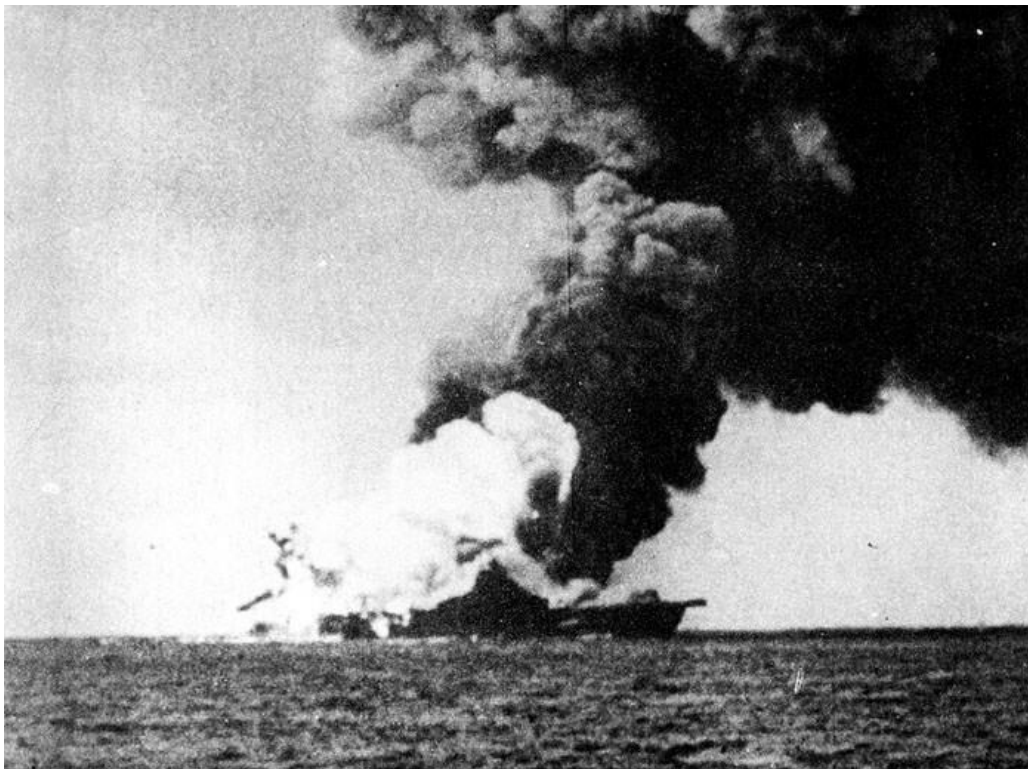
Lt. John Felton, Jr. saw naval action in the Gilbert Islands, Marianas Islands, Iwo Jima, Formosa, [Bonin Islands](#), [Palau](#), the first and second battles for the [Philippine Sea](#), as well as air raids on Tokyo.²¹

The month of October 1944 was particularly active for Felton's ship. During a three-day operation against Japanese forces on Formosa, the *Franklin* suffered a bomb hit.²² Planes from the *Franklin* were among those that sank the Japanese super-battleship [Musashi](#) in the [Battle for the Leyte Gulf](#).²³ A Japanese [kamikaze](#) plane crashed into the *Franklin* at the end of October and caused severe damage to the ship. It had to withdraw to the huge naval base at [Ulithi](#) for repairs.²⁴

The crucible for the *Franklin* was yet to come. With the invasion of [Okinawa](#) scheduled for April 1945, American carrier task forces launched air raids against Japan in early 1945 to destroy as many Japanese aircraft as possible before the invasion. On the morning of March 19, one Japanese plane eluded the fighter air cover and protective ring of supporting ships to drop two bombs that hit the *Franklin* as its aircraft were preparing to take off for another day of raids against Japan.²⁵

On this day, Lt. John Felton started eating breakfast at 6:30 a.m. Although he usually drank one cup of coffee with breakfast, on this day he decided to have a second cup. After finishing his breakfast, Felton

left the officers' ward room at 7:08 a.m. to relieve another officer who was on watch. Just as Felton was about to climb a ladder, one of the bombs struck.²⁶ A blast of fire burned Felton on the face, hand, and side of his body. After sheltering in the ward room for a time while explosions rocked the ship, Felton went out on the flight deck to help fight the raging fires.²⁷



U.S.S. Franklin on March 19, 1945

(Naval History and Heritage Command)

The *Franklin* had become a hellish floating inferno. As airplanes, aviation fuel tanks, bombs, torpedoes, rockets, and ammunition stores exploded, men died in many ways. Pilots were burned alive while trapped in their airplanes. Fire and explosions incinerated and pulverized sailors. Men were crushed between ceilings and floors as compartments collapsed just as they would when an earthquake collapses a building. Those trapped in the ship because of flames and wreckage slowly asphyxiated as the fire consumed their oxygen and smoke enveloped enclosed spaces. Men were blown off the ship by explosions or were forced to jump when flames prevented any other avenue of escape. Not all survived. Some drowned; others broke their necks because they were still wearing their steel combat helmets when they hit the water. The fire was so hot in places that it melted steel, and smoke rose thousands of feet in the air. The *Franklin* was almost dead in the water, on fire, drifting towards Japan (just 60 miles away), and leaving in its wake a trail of debris and men struggling to survive in the water.²⁸

The United States had not lost an Essex-class carrier in the war, and many men worked to make sure the *Franklin* would not be the first. Captain Lesley Gehres rebuffed Admiral Davison's suggestion that he order the crew to abandon ship. Davison and his staff transferred to another ship.²⁹ Lt. Felton was just one of many who worked to save the ship. Felton later said, "There was no panic, no confusion or complaining . . . Even the wounded, the badly burned, and those numbed by shock didn't complain . . .

.³⁰ While some fought the fires, others rescued the wounded or made their way through the interior wreckage of the ship to help trapped men. Men threw ammunition overboard so it would not contribute to the explosions that rippled through the ship.



In one of the most famous photographs from World War II, [Chaplain Joseph O'Callahan](#) performing last rites for an injured sailor on the *U.S.S. Franklin*. O'Callahan was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for ministering the dead and injured, organizing fire-fighting crews, and safeguarding ammunition from raging fires. The sailor in this photo, [Robert Blanchard](#), survived.³¹

(New England Historical Society)

Lt. Felton was ordered to leave the ship at 10:30 a.m. along with other members of Admiral Davison's staff.³²

In an extraordinary feat of seamanship, Captain Harold Fitz ordered his light cruiser [Santa Fe](#) to pull alongside the *Franklin* to evacuate the wounded and non-essential personnel. The Santa Fe nestled against the listing aircraft carrier in what amounted to a controlled collision. It was such a miraculous maneuver that officers and men on both ships paused in their life and death struggles to cheer.³³



The stricken *Franklin*, as seen from a nearby ship

(Naval History and Heritage Command)

The fires and explosions went on for three hours. Finally, the fires were brought under control and another cruiser was able to tow the stricken ship out of the danger zone. By noon the next day, the [Franklin](#) was able to proceed under its own power to Ulithi. Those who saw the ship dock there could not believe it had stayed afloat. After preliminary repairs, it sailed back to the United States.³⁴ The war was over for "[Big Ben](#)."

This single incident, on one day, on one ship, cost the United States Navy more fatalities than it had suffered in all of the first World War--[830 dead](#) and 273 wounded.³⁵

One of the dead was the man Lt. Felton was supposed to relieve just before the two bombs hit the *Franklin*. Lt. J. R. Stewart, a graduate of the University of Iowa, was blown through a window into the water and declared missing in action. Had John Felton not taken a few extra minutes for another cup of coffee that morning, that would have been him.³⁶

By June 1945, Lt. Felton was assigned to the Ottumwa, Iowa, air station ground school as a communications instructor. He taught communications procedures to future naval aviators.³⁷

The heroism of the *Franklin's* crew did not go unrecognized. The ship's Catholic chaplain and [another officer](#) were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Twenty men received the Navy Cross, and another twenty-three were given the Silver Star.³⁸ One of the Silver Star winners was Lt. John G. Felton, Jr., of La Crosse, Wisconsin. His citation read:

Though painfully burned he displayed outstanding courage in organizing groups of men to handle fire hoses. With complete disregard for his own personal safety he led men to a fire in the port forward catwalk and contributed materially to bringing the fire under control. His leadership and calmness when exposed to explosion and falling debris were inspiring and in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States naval service.³⁹

John Felton left the Navy after the war. He and his family lived in Colorado before moving to Texas. Felton spent many years in the industrial lighting division of Sylvania Electric Co.⁴⁰ He was active in the Illuminating Engineers Society.⁴¹



John G. Felton (middle)

(*The Amarillo Sunday News-Globe*, Amarillo, Texas, 1958 February 2, page 3-C)

Felton was active in his church, the Masons, and the Shriners. He and Winifred enjoyed attending concerts and live theater productions. A lover of classical music and opera, Felton sang tenor in church choirs and men's clubs. He and his wife also took many trips and cruises to Europe.⁴²

In 1979, they moved to Davis, California. Shortly after, Winifred was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. John Felton spent the next 17 years as her caregiver until her death. John Felton remained in his home, tending to his rose garden and taking drives in the country.⁴³

One has to wonder if John Felton thought about that fateful morning of March 19, 1945, for the rest of his life, every time he drank a cup of coffee.

John Felton lived to be 90 years old. He died at his home in Davis, California, of complications from a stroke, on September 19, 2003.⁴⁴

As for the battle-scarred *Franklin*, she eventually suffered the same fate as so many of the tools that helped win a world war. She was repaired only to be deactivated in February 1947. Brought back into service in 1952, the *Franklin* was never modernized because of the damage suffered in World War II. Downgraded to an aircraft transport in May 1959, the *Franklin* was sold for scrap in July 1966.⁴⁵

The ship that had cost \$63 million to build was sold to a scrap dealer for \$228,000. A [documentary](#) filmmaker invited a small group of former officers and men, who had been on the ship in 1945, to the salvage yard. As Steve Jackson, the son of one of a crewmen on the *Santa Fe* wrote in his book, "Many of them wept at the sight of the ship they'd worked so hard to save being torn apart."⁴⁶

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2020 August 23

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- ¹⁸ *Ottumwa Daily Courier*, 1945 June 19.
- ¹⁹ Roger Chesneau, *Aircraft Carriers of the World, 1914 to the Present: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1984) 220-222. All of the ships subsequently built with the same dimensions and power plant carry the "class" name of the first ship built of that type.
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- ²² Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Two-Ocean War: A Short History of the United States Navy in the Second World War* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1963), 429.
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- ²⁵ Theodore Roscoe, *On the Seas and in the Skies: A History of the U.S. Navy's Air Power* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1970), 510-511. On the same day, another Japanese bomb hit the aircraft carrier *Wasp*, which was part of the same task force, killing 101 and wounding 269. The *Wasp* was able to resume operations later that day. (Roscoe, 511)
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- ³⁴ Roscoe, 512.
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