

An Interview with Roger Shields, WWII Navy Veteran
By Michele Starkey

Roger Shields was attending high school in Teaneck, New Jersey in 1943 and he shared with us that every Monday morning the PA system would announce the casualties from the War. He told us, "The role call on Monday mornings stated all of the local casualties from the past week and the list seemed to go on and on. The photographs of the deceased were hung in the vestibule of the school until there was no more room to hang the photographs. It seemed that Teaneck suffered horrendous losses during WWII."

Shields enlisted in August of 1943 as soon as he turned 17 years of age and before he even graduated from high school.

Where did you go for your basic training?

"I enlisted in the Navy and went to the Great Lakes for about 2 months for basic. They were receiving about 1,000 sailors each day. I was assigned to a Destroyer Escort ship and sent to Norfolk, Virginia. Our ship was commissioned the William Thomas O'Neill. The USS O'Neill was named after Ensign William Thomas O'Neill, Jr. who was killed on 7 December 1941, during the attack on Pearl Harbor, while serving aboard USS Arizona. He was just 22 years old at the time of his death and I remember that his mother came to the commissioning."

"Did your ship leave immediately after being commissioned?"

"We left on December 23 and sailed to Bermuda for what was called a 'Shakedown Cruise' to test the guns and make sure the vessel was seaworthy. After a few weeks, we returned to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. We didn't know where we were going to be sent. Not even the Captain of the USS O'Neill knew where we were going until we got out to sea."

Where did you go after you got back to the Brooklyn Navy Yard?

"We reported to the U.S. Atlantic Fleet for duty and participated in a convoy operation to Londonderry, Northern Ireland. There were really rough seas during that journey and many sailors were sick – including the cook. I was sent down to help the cook and learned how to bake the bread. It was during that time that I became the ship's baker. After that convoy mission we headed back to New York before disembarking on a series of Atlantic crossings to shepherd convoys to places such as Casablanca, Tunisia, Bizerte and the French Morocco. In the South Atlantic, when we accompanied two aircraft carriers to ferry the airplanes, there were different factions of the French and we were never quite sure if they were enemy or friendly. In the Mediterranean, the Italians were trying to surrender by the time we arrived."

How did you like being the baker?

"Well, I'll tell you, there is an old saying, 'The Navy travels on its stomach' and I suppose there is a lot of truth to that. It was clean work and there was always plenty to eat. Twice a week I made ice cream for the sailors, about one-half of a gallon at a time. We had about 200 sailors on board the ship, not including the officers who had their own stewards, and the ice cream seemed to lift the spirits of the boys. We received just sixty-eight cents each day per man to feed them. Imagine that, you have to stretch that sixty eight cents to feed each man and a couple of days each week they received beans and a couple of days they received hot cakes."

Did the sailors eat everything without complaint?

“No. There was lots of complaining. You would hear things like, ‘It’s not the way my mother makes it’ and ‘This tastes like icing on manure’ but eventually they ate it anyway. We drank a ton of coffee and there were twelve coffee pots on board the ship and I kept them all filled up.”

Did you ever have trouble getting supplies to feed the men?

“Actually, we had just left the Panama Canal in November 1944 en route to the Philippines and we got some bad flour. I was making bread and stuck my hands down into the flour and these tiny bugs started crawling up my arms. It was infected with weevils. I told the Captain and he told me, ‘What can we do? Just bake it up.’ I tried to screen the weevils out of the bread but it was impossible. In the end, the baked bread resembled poppy seeds and everyone just ate it anyway.

When did you head to Iwo Jima?

“There were a group of marines on Iwo Jima and the battle was fought before we arrived but we served as an anti-submarine screen around the island. Then we regrouped and headed for Okinawa on Easter Sunday in 1945 and while we were there, a kamikaze Japanese pilot crashed his plane into our ship. It was May of 1945 and we lost two men and nearly twenty others were wounded. I was downstairs in the galley at the time and wasn’t wounded. The damage to the ship was extensive but it was determined that we could sail back to Pearl Harbor. It took us nearly ten weeks at 8 miles per hour to reach the destination and eventually get back to San Pedro, California. While we were in San Pedro, the Pacific War came to an end.”

What did you do then?

“I was sent to the Brooklyn Navy Yard and helped to feed nearly 3,000 people a day. From there, I was transferred to Washington, DC and fed the prisoners of War who were returning to the States. All of the POWs were given whatever they wanted to eat and they deserved it. I did that until May of 1946 when I was discharged.”

After returning home to Teaneck, Shields became an apprentice baker. He told us, “I took a one-night job and stayed for 1-1/2 years.” In 1947, he had an opportunity to purchase his own bakery in Lake Carmel, NY with his brother who was also a WWII veteran. He would go on to open Shields Bakery in Beacon, NY in 1949 and stay there for 34 years. Shields would meet his wife, Kathleen, who was a waitress at the time. Kathleen, a Scotch-Canadian had traveled to the U.S. to work after the War. The two would marry in 1949 and have four sons. They were married for 53 years before her passing nine years ago.

Roger Shields continues to reside in the Hudson Valley and remains active in VFW Post 1161 and visits Castle Point VA Hospital regularly.

The VFW Post 1161 meets every third Friday of every month in the City of Newburgh Post 973 Bldg. The meetings begin at 1:00 pm and you can call Quartermaster Steve Fanizzi at (845)236-7295 or Commander Donald Ruckdeschel Sr. at (845)562-7828 for more details. They are recruiting for new members and offer many benefits, call for details.