

An Interview with Donald Ruckdeschel
Commander of VFW Post 1161 and WWII Veteran
by Michele Starkey

Donald Ruckdeschel was just fourteen years old and member of the NFA football team on December 7, 1941. He was playing football in his backyard on Ann Street in Newburgh when his mother came outside to tell him that Pearl Harbor had just been attacked. The Sentinel asked him if he knew at the time where Pearl Harbor was located and he shared with us, "I had no idea and, honestly, I don't think my mother knew either. My father had to explain it to all of us. My dad was a WWI veteran."

Ruckdeschel told us that the next day when he returned to NFA, the mood was very somber. "They called all of the NFA students into the assembly and we listened to Roosevelt's speech. It was a very, very sad time for everyone. I was one of four brothers, two older and one younger, and one of my older brothers enlisted immediately became an anti-aircraft crew sergeant, decorated for gallantry in combat while defending the Bridge at Remagen. It was the last bridge standing to cross over into Germany. My brother was credited with shooting down 14 German planes in one day while under heavy enemy fire and saving the Bridge. The other brother served shortly thereafter. I enlisted in the Navy as soon as I graduated in June of 1945 as the campaign was winding down."

Where did you serve?

"The day after my graduation, I went down to enlist. I was sent to Boot Camp in Norfolk, Virginia and became a Radar Operator aboard the Light Cruiser, USS Fargo, CL 106 which became the Flag Ship of the 6th Fleet under Vice Admiral William Beri. Beri was the Commander of all of the Occupational Forces and all Mediterranean Country's. We were based in Naples, Italy. While in port, I was the Ship's Messenger and the Captain's Driver."

What was your worst memory of the War?

"Well, I was driving with one of the marine sergeants who were on board the Ship with us in Northern Italy. We had the windshield down and someone had mentioned to us that we should put the windshield up. We had just passed a car that I had just given the right of way to. There were three CIA agents riding in the other car when suddenly a roadside bomb exploded and killed the three agents instantly. The flash from the explosion scalded the white hat on my head and blew it right off. It was a horrendous explosion. I was eighteen years old at the time and I still remember it clearly to this day. There was a lot of rioting in that area of Italy over the Port of Trieste which was a part of Italy during WWII. Before that, it was Austria and Hungary's only port."

Since you enlisted right out of high school, when did you meet your wife?

"I was already out of the Navy when I met Mary. I was riding in the car with some friends in Newburgh and we gave Mary and another girl a ride. Just 18 months later, we were married and we recently celebrated our 62nd wedding anniversary."

What did you do for work when your Navy service was finished?

"Well, I was supposed to go to college to become a Church Minister because I wanted to return to the Navy as a Chaplain. My father was very ill and I ended up staying close to home and going to work instead. I went to work for the Telephone Company and stayed there for twenty-five years. After that, I opened my own Messenger service and ran that for another twenty-five years. I also shuttled cars for the auto dealers both in and out of

state. In between doing that, I owned and trained Standardbred horses and still managed to get my private pilot license.”

Sounds like you’ve had a busy life, how did you end up as the Commander of VFW Post 1161?

“I have been the Post Commander for many years now. I joined the VFW in 1986 and I’ve been the Commander for half of those years. We honor the past service members and the living veterans who are now ill - mostly through visitations at Castle Point. We have picnics and a ‘Christmas in October’ celebration and of course, a monthly pasta dinner.”

As an American veteran today, what do you think has changed the most through the years since Pearl Harbor?

“We flew one flag – the American flag. I think someday the realization will hit us that the process to become an American citizen is changing. America is beautiful and I am reminded of the words to this song,

‘O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!’

The Sentinel extends our heartfelt thanks to Donald Ruckdeschel for sharing his story with our readers and to all of our WWII veterans on this the Pearl Harbor’s 70th Anniversary commemoration week.