

**William C. Dygert
Seaman First Class, United States Navy
World War 1939-1945**

**Interviewed by the
Herkimer Fulton County Historical Society,
Herkimer, NY
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I: Interviewer

WD: William C. Dygert

I: How did you join the Navy? And how old were you?

WD: I was going to be drafted, so I chose to enlist – I didn't want to be in the dirt and mud, I wanted to sleep in white sheets, that's why I picked the Navy (giggle). I was 17, I wanted to join while I was still in school, but my Mother wouldn't sign, until after I finished my junior year in 1943. I had two brothers in, one in in the Air Force and the other was in the Signal Corp.

I: Tell us about your first experiences after you enlisted.

WD: It was the first time I had ever left home in my life. 3 others from Frankfort that I knew joined the Navy with me. Boot Camp was (not) a lot of fun. On Saturdays we would march, and the Chief Petty Officer said I couldn't march that I had two left feet, so I was a guard. Some guys were rowdy so they would have to march with their C-Bags around the track, sometimes through the night. I went from Samsung to Philadelphia, and on the first night someone stole the money from my money belt while I was sleeping, my first experience away from home.

After that we went [to the] Cranton Ship Yard, where we waited for the USS Miami to come into commission. I still have a piece of the plank. I wanted to be in the Bake Shop but they said that I had to be on the Deck Force. That was where I was dropped 40 or 50 feet, and landed on the deck in between a gun shield and the railing, and broke three vertebrae in my back. We were at war, so they put 6 inch tape around me, and I kept on going.

I: So then where did you go?

WD: We went on a shakedown cruise, down to Trinidad. We were on the ground with the ship, there were hundreds of us running back and forth, to rock the ship. Then the tug helped pull us off of the reef, so the Captain didn't get Court-martialed. (smile) When we went down the Panama Canal, we barely fit through the locks, I could almost reach out and touch the sides.

We picked up a bunch of Marines and transported them to San Diego. That is where we got our orders to go to the Pacific. Three days later we were in Hawaii, and were able to take Liberty, we went into the Pineapple Fields and swam in Waikiki Beach. It was beautiful, but then we went to the Marianas:

I was still in deck force and was on look out with the binoculars, and could see the shells hit the targets on the Islands and the explosions would blow the tops off like the top of the big gas tanks in Utica. We took the first Island, then the next, then the next. That was our first battle, Guam, Rota and Tinian. I remember I saw a guy from Mohawk there, Charlie Comstock, but he's gone. When I was I Long Beach I saw Bob White, and he was also from Mohawk.

I: Tell me about the Turkey Shoot in Guam.

WD: It was like when you see flock of birds, that's what it looked like with the Japanese planes coming at us. Our job was to protect the carriers. They came after us like a swarm of bees, we got two of them, and they got two of our carriers. We lost only two members who got washed overboard without life jackets. Our ship was heavy, but being in a typhoon, we would be tossed like a little tin boat.

I: You then went to Palau?

WD: We took those Islands. The Japanese were there on the beach with Machine Guns, they couldn't reach us we were far enough away. We used our 6" shells, we had two turrets, so we softened it out before we sent the troops in. Then we went to the Philippines and took those Islands. We had the Battle of the San Fernando Strait, where we got the Japanese Cruiser. One cruiser was under and one was over, and we went mid ship and blew it up, so Admiral Halsey said the Miami gets credit for it. We thought we bombarded Iwo Jima, but they were in caves, so we weren't reaching them. They sent us to the Ryukyu, just outside of Japan. That is where we emptied all of our 5" and 6" ammunition, then the destroyer got hit, and we had to tow it back, the rest of the fleet left us. We were like a sitting duck pulling the destroyer, I was scared then with no protection. Then we put all the dead personnel put them in sea bags in our freezer, for when we can get them buried. You get used to it after a while. I used to hunt birds, squirrels and rabbits, so I could separate myself from it.

I: You dropped off the destroyer and got back with your fleet, then what?

WD: We were in the South China Sea did a little bombarding on the Island there to protect the fleet coming up. We were out front pretty much. We were the 38th Fleet under Admiral Bull Halsey, then under Admiral Marc Mitscher we became the 5th fleet.

I: Why is it important for people to remember these stories?

DW: It took a lot of people away from their families, and it was good for the country. We didn't have time to sit and worry about anything, with the deck force, we had to chip paint, and holy stone the decks, definitely was not soft work. I was painting way above, and a the guy going for Chief was lowering me, I tried to offer to help him, but he wouldn't let me, then the rope burned his hands and he dropped me on the deck. I just bounced, I didn't pass out but I couldn't talk.

I: You said you went in the Bake Shop, how was that?

BW: We had fun, I was in there a year and half, we made bread with 300 lbs of flour, dehydrated yeast, and we made cakes, and pies in long tins. They said after the war they were going to make civilian pies, he said he wasn't going to make civilian pies. We had the ice cream and soft drinks stands always available. We would make our own raisin jack, it was stronger than any whiskey you could buy, it looked like dish water, and it had a kick. We had 12 hours on 12 hours off, a cook and a baker had to be at every chow line. We cooked for 1300 men, but we made bread even for the officers. One day an officer said you are making bread with dirt in it, I said you are lucky, you are getting meat with your bread, we cooked the weevils right in the bread instead of sifting them out. (laugh) I liked doing something different than just chip paint and paint, so being a cook was a lot of different duties, we could always go in the Galley and get meat, I found it all interesting.

BW: We had a lot of good times, this one cook, Nougher (sp?), he would go out and get lit up, and he would come back and break into the Chaplain's office and bring the piano down to our area and play and sing. We made the best of it.

I: There were good times but bad times too.

BW: Oh Yeah, while were in the Turkey Shoot, and all the planes were going around us, and all over us, I said omg, this is going to be it. You think you just about had it, even though our guns were blasting away. Then we had to bring the Destroyer Sigsbee back, we saw he damage that had been done, and it rolled the deck up just like you open a can of tuna fish, and then you begin to feel sorry. But, you get the enemy, before the enemy gets you. That was instilled in us, and we were very loyal.

BW: We were a very loyal crew, we had one guy that we didn't like, we took him with us to Boston, we got him lit and we left him there because we knew we were pulling out the next day. So we got to Miami, and the shore patrol came aboard and asked if we wanted him back, and the Captain said No Sir. (laugh) We were happy we got rid of him.

I: What did they do with him?

WD: He must have been reassigned. Our crew was 90% from NY and PA and we have a reunion every year. This year is going to be the 60th down in Philadelphia, but I can't

drive that far. We keep in touch that way. My wife doesn't want to go, all she hears are war stories.

I: How do you talk to fellow Veterans about the war?

WD: I listen to them, and then I tell them that we had it tough out there too, but what are you going to do? We used to kid the Marines called the seagulls and bellhops, Captain Ferguson was in charge of the detachment on our ship, and we would bake a cake for them on their anniversary date. But when you see the Veterans you talk to them like anybody else, but you just don't crow too much, you don't know what they have been through. I go to the VA Hospital in Syracuse, so I know, you see them in wheel chairs, and such.

I: How did you react when the war was over?

WD: We had to go back out to empty the arsenal down in Tarawa we'd skip some islands because there was no room to get in. It was narrow and they had gun placements. We emptied the arsenal and the admiral gave each of us a Japanese Rifle and Bayonet to take home. Then the Japanese wanted some chow, and my buddy put tons of hot sauce in it, they thought it was great. They weren't called back and they were harmless. I also have a Jap Pistol, a Jap rising sun flag, and a doll that is dressed just like the Japanese Guards at the Emperor Palace.

I: Did you have contact with people back home?

WD: I would write my Mother once in a while, I wasn't married at the time, so I didn't have to worry. Because when I left I told my Mother don't worry I will either come home in a bag, or I will walk in. I said don't worry, and she was crying. We had to do what we had to do.

I: So how was it when you did come home?

WD: Oh they were overjoyed. But I was TIRED after a long duty in the Pacific. I had to go back and then I was shipped to the East Coast. That is where I got discharged, Little Beach, Long Island. They sent us home in Cattle Cars and the seats were like buck boards. We'd had a bottle with us, and every time we'd stop we'd get something else, it made the buck boards bearable.

I: How were you different when you got home?

WD: I was nervous. My Dad and I were in our Model-A car, and I got so nervous I slammed the windshield almost went through it. Then I was in the barn and I got mad and put a pipe and drove it through the floor. I was just a wreck, my nerves were all shot. My wife says I am still like that I get mad and I blow my top.

WD: When we first got back from the war, we were met by Dina Shore, and it was the first woman's voice we had heard in months. I say when you go in the Service, you have to grow up, you go in as a boy and you come out as a man. I went back to High School when I returned, and the track teacher wanted me to run, I am 22 years old, and these kids are 15 or 16 years old, but I was fast. Now I am able to hobble along, I have both braces on both knees in the back. They said the vertebrae healed, but I can still feel it. I still see myself when I hit that deck, I had more gold braid (Captain and Officers) around me in seconds, I couldn't even speak. If the Chief had let me help him, it would have never happened.

I: Then what?

WD: While I was in High School, the Guidance Teacher was in the Navy, said I didn't need to be there all day, so I was in class in the morning and worked at LB in the afternoon. I took two regents and another test in 8 weeks. At work is where I met my wife. A friend of ours tried to have us meet, but it didn't happen, so I went to her and we went for a ride, and she drove the car while I talked the whole time. I have lived in Mohawk my whole 79 years. I was President and Manager of Midget League, I worked with the Boy Scouts, I was President of the Local Union at LB. We had mostly women, and I stuck my neck out for them, and I beat the company, I wouldn't allow the company to step on the women, and took out 6 Personnel Managers.

I: Did you tell your wife about the battles of the war?

WD: Some, I didn't want to tire her out with all that, of course she had heard a lot of the stories from others. People need to realize that we did give up everything to save this county, and now we are practically ruining it again, and I hate that.

Transcribed by Misty Straus