County veteran recalls World War II service

Remember America's veterans Nov. 11, 2012

BY KATHY TANBERG

As America remembers Veterans Day Nov. 11, Mercey County World War II veteran Albert Wallender is among them. Raised on a farm south of Beulah, Albert was a new groom of less than three months when he received his draft notice at the age of 22. It wasn't the wedding gift his bride, Esther (Battie) was hoping for, but Albert was ready to do his duty for his country.

"Well, you know you had to serve, it's what we did," Albert said. Still spry and living on his own at the age of 95, Albert remembers that time well. He headed by train to Fort Snelling at St. Paul, Minn.

"At that time they were short of sailors so they gave us the option of going to the Army or the Navy. I chose the Navy, I guess I didn't want to pack a rifle," Albert recalled.

Choosing the Navy meant Albert hopped the train again June 1, 1944. This time he headed west to Farragut Naval Training Station, Idaho.

After Naval boot camp, Albert was sent to radio school where he learned to transcribe code.

"I guess they chose me for this because I could type. I learned to type at Beulah High School," Albert explained.

After radio school Albert was sent to San Francisco, Calif., to be shipped out. He had no idea where he was headed until he boarded the USS Scott, a troop transport ship. Turns out it was headed somewhere in the Pacific.

On board the USS Scott is where Albert made contact for the first time, in a long time, with a fellow serviceman from home, Teddy Neumiller, from Zap.

"After we sailed from San Francisco, I saw one of the crew members onboard who looked familiar to me. One day I got enough nerve to walk up to the guy. I asked if he was from Zap. He said yes, that I was familiar to him, too," Albert said.

After the two sailors made their acquaintance, Albert told him he had made it. The troops traveled topside where they experienced the weather and the summer heat, while the ship's regular crew enjoyed cooler quarters below.

"Teddy took me below where I got to hang around with the crew. It was nice and cool down there below the water. It was nice down there with the crew," Albert said.

Albert sailed to Pearl Harbor where he learned that he was headed to join up with Task Force 58 aboard the USS Enterprise, operating off the coast of Okinawa, Japan, a 462-square mile island of Japan's main-land.

The USS Enterprise, an aircraft carrier known as the Big E, participated in many major actions of the war against Japan than did any other U.S. ship. It earned 20 battle stars, the most for any U.S. warship in World War II.

The USS Enterprise was home to 80 or more Corsair Fighters as part of the Navy's Task Force 58. It operated a radio room where Albert was assigned.

Albert's job was to receive and decode the messages coming in on radio waves to the earphones he wore. The code came in five letter segments and the radio men never knew what they were copying, keeping the information very top secret.

"We just copied the letters, typing them into a decoder machine. The type came up in another location where it was decoded. The codes were changed every day so the enemy would never be able to decode the messages if they got hold of them," Albert explained.

Albert recalled the ship suffered two Japanese Kamikaze hits during his time on the ship, the first not long after he boarded and the second May 14, 1945. Both caused damage.

No one was hurt in the first attack when a Kamikaze hit the aircraft just below the waterline to the rear and knocked a big hole in the ship.

Albert was up in the three-story radio shack at the very top of the ship, a vulnerable location, when the Kamikaze hit. "They locked us in after we got hit. No one could come in or go out until the cabin was soundproofed," he recalled.

The damaged compartments were closed off and the Enterprise was able to sail, left Task Force 58 for the island of Ulithi, where it took a month to repair the damage. Then the ship returned to Okinawa.

The second Kamikaze hit was May 14, 1945. This time it hit the Big E's elevator on the main deck and blew the aircraft elevator about 600 feet into the air. This made big news statewide with several photographs of the elevator flying into the sky.

"That time we lost 16 sailors. You know the Navy buries their dead at sea and they slid all sailors off of the fantail in the rear of the ship, downhill through a chute in a sea bag and into the old ocean," Albert said.

Albert said the Enterprise was crippled and sailed for the Navy shipyards at Bremerton, Wash. Repairs took months, and by then the war in the Pacific ended in August 1945.

The USS Enterprise was converted from an aircraft carrier into a troop transport to carry soldiers home from Europe. The lower hangar deck was converted for the troops. Albert said hundreds of bunk beds were welded onto the hangar deck.

"They built a guard (rail) around the flight deck on top and we sailed the Atlantic to London, England and filled up the ship with soldiers. They (soldiers) played touch football on the deck and watched movies on the way home," Albert recalled.

From his perch high above in the radio towers, Albert watched the victorious celebrations that met the troops when they landed in the New York Harbor.

"There were people all over the dock waiting for loved ones or just there to watch. It was a pretty exciting day," Albert said.

Albert was sent to finish out his duty at the Naval Station in Chicago. His wife joined him for a time and then he was discharged and hopped a train for a final time in uniform.

Esther and her parents met him at the Bismarck Depot. Also there was his first child, daughter, 6 months old Brenda, it was the happiest reunion as he met his child for the first time that day.

After settling in back in Beulah, Albert was hired at the post office where he worked until retirement in 1977 after 31 years.

The Wallenders raised their family of four in Mercey County. Esther passed away in 2007, but the children all came to live here today: Brenda (Bur- chill), Brent, and Beth (Zimmerman) live in Beulah, Brian lives in Hazen. There are 12 grandchildren, three great-grandchildren and six great-great-grandchildren. Albert is a charter member of Hermann Schmidt VFW Post 7298, now dissolved.

He sums up his experience in World War II simply.

"It was a good experience, but you know what they say, There's no place like home."