From Pearl Harbor to Tokyo Bay — the USS West Virginia

William E. McCreary – Navy May 4, 1943-Jan. 28, 1946 – Gunner’s Mate, Third Class (T) USNR – (Philippine Liberation (2 stars); Asiatic Pacific (4 stars); American Theatre; Victory Medal)

By WILLIAM E. MCREARY

I was about to graduate high school when I received the “greeting” from Uncle Sam that I was drafted. I missed my graduation ceremony, so a friend received my diploma for me.

In 1943 at the age of 18, I was on my way to Great Lakes, Michigan for 10 weeks of basic training. From there, I went by train to Seattle, Washington and by ferry to Bremerton Naval Shipyard. Our duty was to rebuild the USS West Virginia that had been raised from the bottom of Pearl Harbor where she had been torn by six aerial torpedoes and two 500-pound bombs in the 1941 Sunday morning sneak attack on the Hawaiian naval base by the Japanese. The USS West Virginia “Wee Vee”, steamed back to California under her own power to be patched up and put back into service equipped with the most modern weapons of warfare.

In the summer of 1944, I was aboard the USS West Virginia when it returned to sea with the U.S. Seventh Fleet. In a stopover at Pearl Harbor, I was able to witness some of the salvage and demolition operations underway on the ships that sank on Battleship Row. The USS Tennessee was still there at Pearl Harbor.

Some revenge was had in the Battle of Leyte Gulf in which a kamikaze (divine wind) plane was shot down by us while it was trying to hit our antiaircraft defenses. Tons of explosives were fired ashore from the USS West Virginia making way for American landings on the island. Several more suicide planes were destroyed.

Gunner School training prepared me as gun striker apprentice on 16 inch, and 20s and 40s and shell handler of the five-inch 38s, the largest antiaircraft guns in use at that time.

Even at war, the crossing of the equator could not go without ceremony. While soldiers stood guard, just out of range of enemy forces, I and other pollywogs by the hundreds were initiated into the mysteries of the deep in the salty presence of King Neptune and his royal party. In what was supposed to be good, clean fun but that cup grease that put on us wasn’t very clean.

In the Surigao Strait, the USS West Virginia headed the battle line of six “old” battleships and when the battle was over the Japanese flotilla which was trying to reach their newly-won beachhead, was destroyed and one of their battleships was sunk.

During operations in Mindoro and Luzon the ship weathered numerous air attacks while we
pounded shore installations in preparation for the landing of the US Sixth Army.

While headed for a rest and recreation period, new orders were received for us to immediately head to Iwo Jima where the Marines were scheduled to land three days later. We were close enough in offshore at Iwo Jima that we used all our guns and even the five-inch 38s. I was firing in a 16 inch gun turret and got to see the historic flag as it was raised on Mt. Suribachi, Iwo Jima.

At Okinawa for about a week, we did more firing, both antiaircraft and main battery, than in any previous combat. The kamikazes were coming in so thick, it was pitiful. This is where on April 1, 1945, our ship received the only damage as a result of enemy action. A Japanese suicide plane penetrated the screen of antiaircraft fire the night of the invasion and crashed into her port side, killing four men and wounding 23 others. I brought home a souvenir piece of the metal from the kamikaze plane’s “meatball” insignia.

We were advancing toward an invasion of Japan, when the chaplain announced over the PA system about the dropping of the atomic bomb. Soon thereafter, it was announced that Japan had surrendered and our ship headed northward to join Admiral Halsey’s Third Fleet. The USS West Virginia was the first “old” battleship to enter Tokyo Bay. She was the only victim of the Pearl Harbor attack present for the victory ceremonies. We dropped anchor right beside the USS Missouri for the signing of the peace treaty.

At Yokosuka, Japan, we were able to go ashore and buy souvenirs. During her engagement in the Pacific battle scene, the USS West Virginia shot down eight enemy planes, and assisted in the destruction of nine others. We fired over 3,000 16-inch projectiles, about 30,000 secondary battery rounds, and more than 200,000 smaller projectiles — a total of 5,500 tons of ammunition. We traveled 63,000 nautical miles.

As we were homeward bound, we stopped in Okinawa to take aboard several hundred Pacific war veterans coming home for discharge. After a stopover in Pearl Harbor, we were met by an enthusiastic crowd at San Diego where we were mustered out.

On a lighter side, one thing we all missed most was fresh milk. All we had when out to sea was powdered milk. Once we were back to San Diego, they made all the fresh milk we wanted available to us.

“Blue Jackets” by which we are known, learn really quickly about the lingo of the seaman. I volunteered when we were asked, “Who would like to be the head person in charge?” For 3 months, I was responsible for cleaning the toilets . . . heads as they are known by seamen. On
another occasion, I volunteered to drive a truck. Well, my truck was a wheelbarrow. On ship you don’t call walls, walls. They are bulkheads.

While at sea, the bugler would sound “swim call” and hundreds of seamen would bound over the ship rail for a swim in the Pacific.

The USS West Virginia entered her final stages of inactivation in the latter part of February 1946 and was decommissioned on January 7, 1947 and placed in reserve, as part of the Pacific Reserve Fleet. She never again received the call to active duty, remaining inactive until struck from the Navy list on March 1, 1959. On August 24, 1959, she was sold for scrapping to the Union Minerals and Alloys Corp. of New York City. — From the Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships (William (Bill) McCreary is married to Jessie Dyer, formerly of Huntsville and Cincinnati, and they live in Helenwood.)