

William Alan Hohl interviewed October 1, 2007

Electricians Mate, 2nd Class, US Navy, June 1944 – May 1946

During the Second World War, Alan was working at Doehler- Jarvis as an apprentice die maker. Because his job was defense related, he was deferred from the draft for awhile. Late in the war, Alan figured the military needed soldiers more than die makers. He was drafted in June of 1944 and had a choice of the three services to enter. He chose the Navy figuring that way he would have a bed to sleep in and a decent meal.



Alan left for Philadelphia to be inducted and then on to Camp Perry, VA for boot camp. At boot camp, they wanted to know some of his hobbies. He said he liked to read so he was assigned to the camp library. Having this job got him out of a lot of the boot camp training. Being a little older than most of the men at boot camp, he was better equipped for the experience, but he remembers some of the kids crying themselves to sleep at night. Alan's younger brother, Gene, had enlisted by this time and was also at Camp Perry. Alan did go to visit him once during boot camp to bawl him out for joining the Navy at 17.

At boot camp, the men took tests to find out where to assign them. He scored high enough that he could choose his job and he chose something for instruments. This classification was full, however. Alan was sent on to Miami, FL as a seaman, but didn't have any specific training so they asked "Why are you here?" They assigned him to diesel engineering and assigned him to a ship that was just being built in Texas.

The ship was an ocean going tug (ATA 185)(ATA – Auxiliary Tug) that was launched out of Orange, TX and went on a shake-down cruise in the Gulf of Mexico. The ship carried about 45 crewmen and was a mix of new and experienced sailors. The cook was from Reading and was a Pearl Harbor survivor. Everyone took turns at mess duty. Alan's job was as an electrician and worked with the engines and was also in charge of the radar. This meant he spent a lot of time below deck while on duty. Because of the small size of the ship, the men all got to know each other including the captain and executive officers. Alan also remembers that the ship was nicely appointed with linen table clothes and china to eat off of.

Through the Panama Canal...

While in the Gulf on the shake-down cruise, a hurricane came up that almost capsized the ship, but they made it back to port. Alan thinks the near capsizing was related to the overall inexperience of the crew. Next, they headed down to Panama where they spent Christmas and New Years. They towed some ships through the canal and returned back through and then headed back through so now they were on the Pacific side. Their cargo was a series of barges containing dry docks. They were in a convoy with other tugs. Each tug pulled a series of barges behind them. The docks were to go to the Philippines, but their orders were changed to have them head to the Marshall Islands. The barges were left behind and they headed to the Marshalls.

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Because the tug was armed and small enough to get in close to shore, it could also serve as an escort ship. Alan's ship escorted landing craft into Okinawa. They could see the glow from the battle as they approached the island and as they came closer to shore, the guns from the bigger ships were firing over their heads into the island. Kamikaze planes were a constant threat and Alan saw one hit the USS Pennsylvania which he thought would sink, but didn't. When in port, they would use a fogging machine to obscure the port from the sky. Sometimes, a Kamikaze would crash into an island thinking it was a ship. The scariest time was one night when they were at general quarters and they could see a light in the sky spiraling toward them. Alan doesn't know if it was a plane or something else, but it hit the water nearby. It was a helpless feeling watching the unidentified object come toward them without being able to stop it.

A Flight on a Bomber...

The ship would sail into Saipan from time to time and here, he was able to visit his brother Gene's ship three or four times. Saipan had a very good airport established and Alan went over to the airstrip to watch the B-29's come in from their runs to Japan. Some of the planes would come back with wings or engines hanging off. Once the planes were repaired, they would have to take a test flight. Alan and a friend talked to the crew of one plane and asked them if they could fly on a test flight, the crewman said they could take their places and Alan flew as a "radioman" on the one hour flight. They arrived back after dark. Alan and his friend walked off the air strip into the pitch black and got lost in the jungle. Even though the island was secured, there were still Japanese on the island. Alan and his friend didn't have any fire arms, just pocket knives. They headed down hill toward the water and along came a low bed truck who offered them a ride, but he eventually left them off and they had to walk some more. Finally, along came a Lieutenant in a jeep who gave them a ride back to the dock.

A typhoon hit the fleet on June 2 when Alan's ship was off Okinawa. The larger ships headed out to sea, but Alan's ship turned into the storm and ran both engines with the anchors set to keep from being driven into shore. When the storm ended, there were some ships that were completely up on the beach. Alan's tug was involved in pulling these ships off the beach at high tide. For some ships, it would take more than one tug to do the job.

The crew didn't spend much time on shore, they were at sea for 60 days straight on the way out from Panama. The ship would be re-supplied in port and a detail from the ship would go ashore to pick up the supplies. Alan reports that they were always well supplied. One activity was watching movies, many of them new movies. One of Alan's activities was to keep a journal, even though this may have been against regulations. He would go into the gyroscope room which gave him some privacy, and write in his journal. They could also listen to the radio and frequently heard Tokyo Rose trying to persuade them to give up, but it didn't affect them, they had a job to do. On shore, there were some recreation opportunities and Alan remembers that on one island, a professional baseball player was the athletic director. Occasionally, they would play baseball against another ship. Mail was infrequent and one time, Alan received 35 letters at once. On another occasion, he received a Christmas fruitcake in July.

One time, after the war had ended, Alan's ship sailed down a waterway into a lake on Okinawa. There, the local children came swimming out to the ship looking for candy and cigarettes. The children did give them money for the items they received.

Alan's ship returned to the States via Hawaii and landed in San Francisco. It was here that he went to visit his brother, Gene, at Gene's barracks and found him there, very sick. Alan took him to the hospital in Oakland. Alan was concerned that Gene might die because he was so sick, but fortunately, Gene made a full recovery.

While in San Francisco everyone on the ship in engineering went on leave except Alan. He would have been sent back out with the ship to observe the atomic bomb tests in the Pacific, but he hadn't yet taken his leave so he was able to leave the ship at this time. His next assignment was to the USS Tennessee which was being decommissioned in Philadelphia.

Alan Was discharged in May 1946 from Bainbridge, MD. He missed the independence of civilian life and was eager to have things get back to normal. By now, however, the family had gone in different directions and no longer lived at home together as they had before the war. While he was always looking forward to getting home during his time in the service, looking back, he doesn't regret it.