

Baraboo Sailor Really saw the World

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

You've head the ageless navy recruitment slogan "Join the Navy and See the World"? Well, a Baraboo sailor did just that in 1934, venturing to or near both the Antarctic and the Arctic circles, with four yeas of WWII service in between. Here we'll recount some of his adventures.

His name was Glenister Van Zile, and he was part of that generation which came of age between the two great World Wars. Born in 1915, the Armed Services had a great appeal for young men of that Depression generation, and 1934 found him enlisting as a sailor. It was a big change from the farm life where he was raised.

Glenn was a brother to Viola Erlandson, well-remembered long time Baraboo resident and restaurateur. They were raised at the foot of Breezy Hill Road east of Baraboo, in the home of their grandfather, Alfred Capener. It is said that Grandpa Capener could not remember the name Glenister, and just called him "the boy",

The family soon adopted the name "boy", and this remained his family nickname. In 1997 Viola prepared a fascinating 7 page remembrance of life on the Breezy Hill Farm, perhaps worth a story of its own the future. She does reveal that Glen was a sleepwalker, and could have been refused by the Navy.

The Search for Amelia Earhart

Fortunately, Glenister Van Zile later did a summary of his first few yeas aboard the Battleship Colorado. Naval

operations were pretty routine until 1937 brought word of the disappearance of aviatrix Ameila Earhart, and the ship sailed 1800 miles full speed to the Phoenix Islands, where the search continued for three weeks.

True to the promise to see the world, Glenn's duty now carried him to Spain and environs. In 1940 he began work building ships at Bremerton. Soon he was serving on a destroyer, with harrowing duty though we still were not at war. After Dec 7, 1941, it is unclear but duty now took him to Iceland, where they sighted and rescued 12 persons, 12-day survivors of a sunken freighter.

After his ship served protecting 14 convoys across the Atlantic, he found himself in the South Pacific on the destroyer Edwards seeing action against Japanese fighters. Amazingly, the destroyer was soon ordered to the Aleutian islands of Alaska—talk about seeing the world!

After sinking a submarine they now returned to the South Pacific, assisting at the landings at Saipan and Tinian, perhaps involving Baraboo army men or Marines.

In the above paragraphs I have struggled to summarize several pages of his paper, and was continually amazed at his complex and wide raging assignments.

Now an Ensign, Glen earned stateside duty in 1945 fitting out another Destroyer, the Gurke. The war ended at this time, and in Oct. 1945, he arrived in Tokyo, Okinawa and Miyako. Next came the Philippines, where the ships company and 20 army men handled 25,000 surrendered Japanese.

Post-war and Antarctica

By now he was a Lt. (jg), which then translated into Chief Petty Officer in the post war Navy. At this point we have Van Zile's transcribed diary. This requires a story of its own, involving Admiral Byrd and the Antarctica expedition. Meantime a copy of Van Zile's adventures and diary may be read at the Sauk County Historical Society.



Glenister Van Zile

The thrust of this article has been to illustrate how in many ways Van Zile did indeed see the world, or much of it. In the Pacific Ocean, he saw the Antarctic Circle, several combat areas during the war, as well as the Aleutians and close to the Arctic Circle. In the Atlantic, he touched on South America, participated in mid-Atlantic convoys during the war, plus stops in Spain, the Panama Canal, and Greenland

Yeas ago, just before the war, there was a lively song that went something like this: "We joined the Navy to see the world, and what did we see, we saw the sea. We saw the Atlantic and the Pacific and the Pacific wasn't terrific, and the Atlantic wasn't what it was cracked up to be." This writer was among the eager young men singing this tune in college competition in 1939, oblivious to the coming conflagration. Not all of those who were singing survived the coming challenge to their generation.

For Van Zile, it was quite a ride for a boy from Breezy Hill. In a later article we will have more details, including his family life and daughters now living among us. They can be proud of their Father, especially on this Armed Forces Day.