

Serving on the USS Saranac: Memories of the Naval War in the Pacific

**An Interview with my Grandfather, Bayard Robert Nielsen
(interviewed by Bayard Nielsen)**

For this interview, I had the privilege of talking with my Grandfather, Bayard Robert Nielsen, about his experiences in World War II.

Q-- What years did you serve in the Navy?

I enlisted in the Navy in 1941 and served until 1945 and was in reserves for another six or seven years.

Q-- What rank did you achieve?

I went from Cadet to Lieutenant, and almost was an Admiral.

Q-- Did you start out in the Navy?

Yes, I was originally supposed to be a Navy cadet. After Pearl Harbor, I was called to the Port of Oakland to go on a travel preflight, they decided flying was not for me and I went back to San Jose State to finish off. Then when I had enough units, I went to deck school and finally was stationed at a Fleet Oiler called the USS Saranac, which is named after a lake in New York. I was a part of the invasions around the Pacific. We supplied airplanes with fuel .(we had five million gallons of oil and gasoline). We were involved in the invasions of the Marshall Islands, Saipan, Taipan, and the Philippines. During the battle of Saipan, my ship was hit, and many of the crew were killed when a bomb went off in the engine room after going through the smoke shaft. One thing I remember is that all of the crew members that were manning the fantail guns, and anti-aircraft guns had broken their feet. This was a result of the concussion of the bomb. In Saipan, about 20 people on my ship were killed.

Q-- So where was your ship taken after it had been damaged?

Well, they sent a huge sea-going tug boat that took us all the way from Taipan, which is next to Saipan, to Pearl Harbor. We had a couple of destroyers to escort us safely home. After we reached Pearl Harbor, they patched us up and sent us to San Pedro where they did the major work on us.

Q-- What were the "groups" or "units" called in the Navy?

They were called fleets, and I served in the fifth fleet.

Q-- Did you ever come in contact with a well known General?

The day before the Invasion of the Philippines, we fueled a cruiser, which had Douglas MacArthur aboard. He came on our vessel with his staff and I could see him waving. He was always known for saying "I WILL RETURN". Sure enough, we found the famous picture of MacArthur and his forces landing on the Philippine island of Leyte, in the paper during the battle of Leyte Gulf, which was the last major Navy battle.

Q-- What was another important battle you were in?

In the battle of Surigao Strait, about the size of the San Francisco Bay, it was well above 100 degrees, and all of the ships were giving off so much steam that it was hard for the Japanese to see the ships. For that we were thankful. We were surprised at the number of fleets the Japanese had. They were in a line that seemed to stretch forever. They all had their "headlights" on so as to overwhelm us. In this battle, we totally annihilated our Japanese opponents.

Q-- Do you stay in contact with your old friends from the USS Saranac?

Well, up until a couple of years ago, we would send each other postcards, but just recently, the last member of the crew, other than myself, passed away.

Q-- Were any of your children born yet?

In 1945, to celebrate Thanksgiving we traveled back home to San Francisco, and that was when my oldest son, Niel was born.

Q-- Is there any reason for ships having the names they do?

Yes, if it was a battleship, it had to be named after a State. If it was a Cruiser, it would be named after a large city. If it was an airplane carrier, it would be named after a historic event; and lastly, if it was a tanker, it would be named after a river or lake.

Q-- What were the living conditions like?

They were excellent actually. One good thing about being in the Navy was that we never missed a meal! The food was served to the officers by waiters. It was much like eating at a fancy restaurant. Although lower officers were not served as well, they still had the same food.

Q-- What did you do for entertainment?

We watched movies, played a lot of cards, and mostly would tell each other stories.

Q-- What was one drawback of being in the Navy?

You were always away from your family, and would always miss them. However, at every port people would cheer, because the mail bag for A074 Saranac would be waiting for them.

Q-- Was the USS Saranac the only ship you were a member of?

No, After Saipan, the Saranac had to have repairs so I was on a cargo ship called the Fairbalt North Dakota