

MEMORIES OF A FAMED DESTROYER WW II vet not done with mission

Original USS Nicholas plaque to return to Hawaii

By Andrew Ragali

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WALLINGFORD — Nineteen-year-old Jack O'Neill stood aboard the USS Nicholas, a Fletcher-class destroyer anchored in Tokyo Bay, and saluted as 87 allied representatives walked by on Sept. 2, 1945 on their way to meet with Japanese officials. The Nicholas transported both foreign and U.S. dignitaries to the USS Missouri, also anchored in the bay, where the Japanese Instrument of Surrender was signed, effectively ending World War II.

"You didn't want to screw up," O'Neill, 88, of Wallingford, said of the moment. "Everyone was watching you. We were basically the first ship to make peaceful contact with an enemy ship."

O'Neill was a seaman on the Nicholas from January 1944 until October 1945. He served in the U.S. Navy from 1943 to 1946. The ship is considered one of the most decorated in U.S. history, and was chosen to lead the fleet to Japan for the peace treaty signing.

The Nicholas was commissioned in 1942 and served in the Pacific Ocean during WWII, the Vietnam War and Korean conflict until it was decommissioned in 1970. During WWII, the ship was decorated with 16 battle star accommodations for meritorious participation in battle, and a total of 30 through all three wars. It was named after Major Samuel Nicholas, the first commander of the Marines. "We were so very proud of the ship and its accomplishments," O'Neill said. "It was a great ship with a good crew. We never had any problems."

O'Neill's pride in the ship has motivated him to keep its memory alive. His first stop as a crew member in 1944 was Pearl Harbor, the famous base on the island of Oahu, Hawaii. For the first time since that trip, about 70 years ago, O'Neill will return to Pearl Harbor with his family to dedicate the original plaque and American flag from the Nicholas to the Battleship Missouri Memorial. Through the years, O'Neill has made sure the plaque and flag were preserved, caring for the items himself much of that time.

The dedication ceremony will occur in November, O'Neill said. Earlier this month, Acme Crating Co., in Windsor, packed the plaque and flag at no charge. The items were also flown to Honolulu at no charge by Mainfreight, an air freight company, O'Neill said.



Jack O'Neill, of Wallingford, stands in the basement of his home on Wednesday. O'Neill served in World War II on the USS Nicholas, which led an armada to Japan to sign the peace treaty ending the war.

| Dave Zajac / Record-Journal



The Japanese delegation comes onboard USS Nicholas (DD-449) to be taken to USS Missouri for the surrender ceremonies on Sept. 2, 1945. Most sources say the Japanese were transported to the Missouri by USS Lansdowne (DD-486), while Nicholas carried members of the Allied Powers' delegations.

| Photograph from the Army Signal Corps Collection in the U.S. National Archives.

"It was like packing the Mona Lisa," O'Neill said of the detail and attention put into keeping the artifacts preserved. How he came into possession of the two items "is a long story," he said. Every U.S. warship flies a flag and has a bronze plaque that states when and where the ship was commissioned. When the Nicholas was decommissioned in 1970, the ship's first captain was given the plaque and flag. During a 1973 ship reunion, he gave the plaque to reunion organizers. O'Neill said the plaque was then given to the "guy who would run the next reunion, but he disappeared."

O'Neill said he spent six years tracking down the plaque, which he eventually found and brought to the next three ship reunions. In the meantime, O'Neill and other former shipmates petitioned for another ship to be named after the Nicholas. The original USS Nicholas served during World War I. Successful in their push, on March 1984, the guided missile frigate USS Nicholas FFG 47 was commissioned. O'Neill presented the plaque and flag to the ship, which carried both items for 30 years until it was decommissioned in March 2014.

After the ship was decommissioned earlier this year, the plaque and flag were returned to O'Neill. He didn't want to just keep the items in storage, though. Proud of his ship and its past, he wanted the items displayed prominently. So he contacted the curator of the Battleship Missouri Memorial, who was more than happy to take the items and display them in the museum, O'Neill said.

A ceremony next month will dedicate the museum's newest additions. With the help of his Masonic Temple in New Haven and a former shipmate, O'Neill will be able to attend. But he isn't going to Hawaii for fun. "This is a mission," he said.

O'Neill is involved locally as a member of the Meriden Antique Veterans, a group that meets to discuss issues concerning veterans. The group often serves as the honor guard during military funerals in the region. Peter Burch, a member of the group, said O'Neill is "very proud of his ship." "It had remarkable service during WWII, and (O'Neill) is a very patriotic person, as are all the antique veterans," he said.

After O'Neill returns from Hawaii, he will have completed his mission of giving the plaque and flag a permanent home. But that doesn't mean O'Neill is finished. The next step is petitioning the government to name another warship after the Nicholas. "We did it before and it worked, so we can do it again," he said.

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