

Remembering His WWII Combat

Westtown's Joe Valentino recalls his war experience through his collection of mementos

by Gail Guterl, Vice Chair, Historical Commission



First he was a “pollywog;” then he became a “shellback.” Before he was any of these things, he was a “motor mach” (a motor machinist), a seaman and most importantly, a collector of memories.

Westtown resident Joseph D. Valentino knows the value of remembering and how remembrance preserves history.

Atypical of World War II veterans, the 94 year old is happy to share colorful memories of his life in the U.S. Navy from 1942 through 1945. And despite it being 73 years since he served aboard the USS Oberon, an attack cargo ship, Valentino relates his stories peppered with the lingo of Navy life as if it was only yesterday.

Many of his memories grace the walls of his home, which is full of Navy memorabilia, each with a special story. His prized possession, a yellow, purple and red Japanese silk kimono he bought in Tokyo, hangs on one wall. Photos of the brand new USS Oberon when he boarded her in 1942 and photos of its battered condition at the end of the war hang on another. A certificate verifying he crossed the equator twice has some very colorful back stories attached to it. One photo shows the Oberon unloading a 20-foot truck onto a Higgins boat, sometimes referred to as an LCVP (Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel). Also framed are the many colorful commendations and medals he earned in combat with exotic names like the Euro-African-Mid Eastern Campaign, the Asiatic Pacific Campaign, and a discharge pin with the odd nickname, the “Ruptured Duck.”

In July 1942, with no expectations of what combat would be like, Valentino, then age 20 left a good job at Downingtown Paper Co and enlisted in the U.S. Navy. His father, who had served in the Army in World War I, was disappointed. He had hoped Joe would follow in his footsteps, “but I figured if I was in the Navy on a ship, I would always have a clean bunk and a hot meal.”

After basic training in Providence, RI, where occupational testing showed an affinity for mechanical tasks, Joe was sent to “diesel school” in Richmond, VA. From there he trained on landing craft in Newport News, VA.

After training, Petty Officer Joseph D. Valentino, now a machinist’s mate, was introduced to what would be his home away from home for the next three years, USS Oberon, named after one of the moons of Uranus. This 7,500 ton, 460-foot ship could travel at 16.5 knots and bristled with cranes and hoists that allowed the ship to load and transport trucks, tanks and personnel. The Oberon carried 5-inch cannon and 20 millimeter and 40 millimeter guns, and used them many times.

On the Oberon, Valentino, who had never left the U.S. before his enlistment, saw action in six invasions (Morocco, Sicily, Italy, southern France, Okinawa and Leyte, the Philippines) during which “someone was always shooting at you,” he says.

Despite fearing for his life during operations, Valentino, an optimist, insists, “I can’t say anything was hard about deployment. I was fortunate to not be wounded, although I was shot at a lot of times.” (One of his mementos is a piece of shrapnel that just missed him.) “You make lots of friends and have great experiences. I was in Casablanca long before Humphrey Bogart,” he jokes.

One memory that makes Valentino laugh are the many rituals observed upon traversing the equator. “Before you cross the equator you are a pollywog,” he explains. “After, you become a shellback. As the ship crosses, new initiates might get dunked in a tank, or officers might be required to remove their pants. Or in one case, an officer kissed the bum of an enlisted man. It was all in fun.”

One of Valentino’s most vivid memories is of August, 1945. “We were resupplying in Manila in preparation for landing troops in Honshu, Japan, when we heard the news on the mess hall radio,” Valentino remembers. “We didn’t know the significance of this, but we felt it was important. When we

heard a second bomb had been dropped on Nagasaki, we realized something was up. I was always sorry FDR never got to see the end of the war, but thankful Truman took the action he did to end it."

With restrictions on what they could do or write - sailors were not allowed to have cameras onboard ship; in fact "our cameras were confiscated and locked in a room until we were discharged." Valentino believes this explains why "everyone collected stuff." Pins and insignia from Japanese soldiers, photos, menus, newspaper clippings, clothing, various sailor's hats - all were saved. He treasures his copy of "War Diary of USS Oberon," a pictorial memento given to every sailor who served on the ship upon discharge.

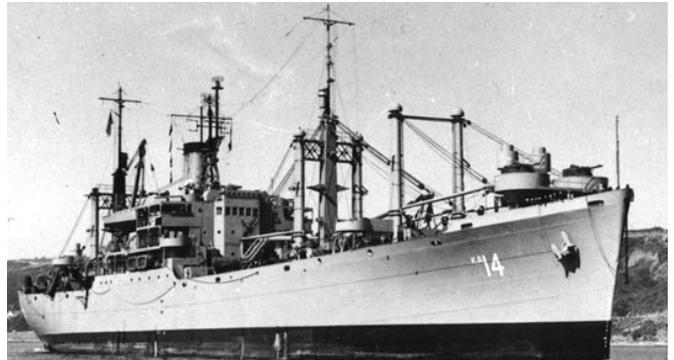
Valentino was demobilized in December, 1945. He went back to work at Downingtown Paper Co. and received a promotion. He met his wife Rose a few years after the war at her twin sister's engagement party, and they married in 1948. That same year, they took a tour of Italy, England, and Amsterdam, and returned to enjoy 66 years of marriage in Westtown until Rose's death in March. But he did not forget his shipmates and his experience on the Oberon. "For a long time after the war we had reunions," Valentino said. "I still correspond with a couple of fellas I served with."

Sadly, the Oberon no longer exists. It saw action in the Korean and Vietnam wars and was decommissioned and sold for scrap in 1970. However, it is still very much alive on the walls of Joe Valentino's Westtown home.

MEMENTOS & MEMORIES:



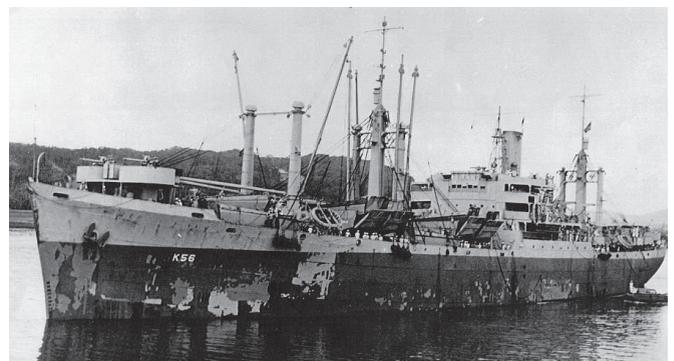
Joe Valentino, newly initiated into the Navy.



The USS Oberon looked spiffy & new when first launched from Kearny, NJ on March 18, 1942. The ship earned 6 battle stars in World War II.



Valentino bought this yellow, purple and red silk-lined kimono from a Japanese woman on the street in Okinawa.



The USS Oberon saw a lot of combat and wear and tear by the end of the war.