

# Washburn During The War Years

## 1939-1945 — The Boys At War — 9 (NO NO. 9)

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Richard W. Olson, son of Mr. and Mrs. Elmer W. Olson of Washburn, entered the Navy in April 1942, and was trained as a meteorology officer. He served for 17 months on the USS Natoma Bay, a small escort carrier, then on Navy weather stations in the Philippines and the United States. He was discharged in October 1945. In October 1944, the Natoma Bay was part of a large naval task force supporting troop landings on Leyte Island in the Philippines. The large carriers of the task force were lured north by a decoy Japanese force, exposing the Natoma Bay, other small carriers, and the troop transports to destruction by a powerful Japanese force approaching from the west. In his letter, Olson described the ensuing one sided battle. "This ship participated in the Leyte Operation, the curtain raiser of the Invasion of the Philippines. We went to Leyte to give air support to the amphibious landings of McArthur's troops, and we were doing a good job. The landings went off as scheduled and our ground troops were making excellent progress.

"Then the Japs decided that they wouldn't take it lying down, and their fleet, which had been playing hide and seek (mostly hide) since Midway, came steaming along to join the big battle. The first inkling that we



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had that there was going to be anything out of the ordinary was an urgent radio dispatch that some of our small ships were being shelled by a strong Japanese surface force of battleships, cruisers and destroyers. This wasn't the type of engagement we had been scheduled to play, and we weren't particularly equipped for such a battle, but we did have some hole cards. (The Navy does plan ahead, you know.)

"So our ordnancemen went to work, readying our planes for this new assignment, and soon we had a strike ready. The enemy was uncomfortably close and no one aboard was ignorant of the seriousness of the situation. Shells were falling within our screen, and the Japs were closing us. We could see their masts and smoke and we knew their big stuff would soon be within close

range.

"Our only real defense was our squadron, and they were fully aware of the extent of their responsibility. We launched everything we had to join up with planes from others of our outfit to throw our 'Sunday Punch'. The pilots really delivered the goods and as a result of their attacks the Nipponese admirals decided they had bitten more than they could chew. They turned and started a run for cover, and when they turned so did we.

"From pursued we became pursuers, and defense became attack. Our ships launched strike after strike and they got in some telling blows. It was David again, chopping down Goliath, but we were there, and we saw it ourselves. And we can take real pride in the fact that the little fellows took care of themselves, turning the capital ships of the Jap fleet and sending them barreling home. The air attack that we had that afternoon was just an anti-climax, but again our planes covered themselves with glory, turning back the enemy with heavy loss before they could get close enough to even see what we looked like.

"It was a good show, an exciting show, and for a while, there is no doubt about it, we were uncomfortable about our future.

But one thing particularly stands out about this unique battle between the OVE'S and the best the Jap fleet could offer. The whole ship worked as a real team. The long hours of drills and training paid off. Every department of the ship functioned as smoothly as ever, in lots of cases even more so. The flight deck handling crews outdid themselves in smooth, rapid handling of the heaviest schedule they had ever undertaken. The ordnancemen loaded their 'eggs' without a bobble, the engineering force gave us all the speed they had in their engines, the gun crews manned their guns as efficiently and as calmly as if they were going through a drill off the California coast. The chips were down, this was the pay-off, and the ship, from skipper to shaft-alley oiler, delivered. It was a team action and team-play turned the trick.

"True to good Navy form, when the fleet action was over, we went right back to our assigned mission, supporting the Leyte operation, the job we had started out to do. That's about the whole story, as we saw it, and every man aboard may feel a just pride in the part we played in one of the outstanding actions of the war. Who said we weren't on the first team?"