

Local author reflects on 71st anniversary of V-J Day

By BRIAN D. RATTY

In the dark, early days of World War II, my family moved to the North Coast. I was just a young'un in short pants at the time and had many heroes. They included Roy Rogers and Gene Autry, of course, but my biggest heroes were the brave and bold Navy pilots that I watched working with my father at the Astoria Naval Air Station. That's what I wanted to be: a Navy pilot.

Astoria played a pivotal role in helping America win the war. This bustling little fishing and logging community on the Columbia River helped provide a fleet of 455 ships and thousands of fighter planes to the war effort.

Shortly before America entered the war, in 1940, American industrialist Henry J. Kaiser secured a contract to build 31 cargo ships for the British government. The Brits were in a bad way, standing alone as they fought the Nazis in Europe. They needed help, and the American government was beginning to provide them with much-needed war materials.

With the British contract in hand, Kaiser searched the communities of the West Coast for the best locations to build his shipyards. The sites had to be on a navigable waterway, with a large local workforce and a good transportation system. In addition, the locations had to have access to cheap energy, as his shipyards would run 24 hours a day. His first selection was 90 miles upstream from Astoria, on the shores of the Columbia River, next to Portland. This area offered low-priced hydro power and had a large population nearby, with excellent rail connections.

As the shipyard was being built, Kaiser and his nautical engineers designed the first Liberty ship. Their concept was simple: Make the ships

durable, inexpensive and easy to build. During the course of the war, 18 American shipyards would build 2,710 Liberty ships, using the Kaiser design. On May 19, 1941, Kaiser's Oregon Shipbuilding Corporation launched the first Liberty ship, The Star of Oregon. However, the first five ships built that year all sunk in action within months of their commissioning. England was losing the war.

After the surprise attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, America entered World War II. As Kaiser's company constructed another shipyard, across the river in Vancouver, Washington, he and his engineers designed a new type of aircraft carrier that would become known as the Casablanca-class Escort Carrier. The "baby-flattops" were built using the standard hull of the Liberty ship with a flight deck on top. These small carriers were used for convoy duty and to resupply the larger fleet aircraft carriers with planes and crews. The concept was again simple and easy to build. Within months of finishing the plans, Kaiser had a U.S. Navy contract to build 50 ships. During the war, Kaiser also expanded his operations in Oregon and built more Liberty ships, landing crafts, and T2 tankers for the U.S. Maritime Commission.

Aircraft carriers need planes and crews, and that's where Astoria came in.

The Navy already had a naval air station on Tongue Point, just east of town, where PBY Catalina seaplanes arrived for coastal patrols and anti-submarine operations. In addition, Astoria had a good-sized municipal airport with room to grow, and the Navy welcomed the town's deep-water location, so near to the mouth of the Columbia River. Best



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The PBY Catalina was one of the most widely used seaplanes of World War II. It was one of many types of planes that Navy pilots and escort carrier crews trained with at the Tongue Point Naval Air Station in Astoria.

of all, the entire estuary was protected by the 249th Coast Artillery. Fort Columbia and Fort Canby stood on the north side of the river, with Fort Stevens on the south shore. Those units also maintained and mined the mouth of the Columbia River. This "iron triangle" of defense made Astoria a formidable fortress.

My grandfather, Harry Ratty, had worked many years for the U.S. Navy, maintaining lighthouses up and down the coast. In 1940, he became the head of civilian construction at Tongue Point Naval Air Station. He and his crews built barracks, chow halls, shops, movie theaters and administrative buildings. Prior to the start of the war, my father, Dudley Ratty, did the same kind of work for the Army in Alaska. Early in 1941, with the war looming, all non-essential civilians were ordered back to the lower-48. After the war started, Grandfather got Dad a job with the Navy as a civilian carpenter.

The primary mission of the Tongue Point Naval Air Station in Astoria was to train Navy pilots and crews on the new types of combat planes that would serve on escort



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carriers. They would also instruct the pilots on short-field landings and take-offs, in preparation for the small decks of the baby-flattops. Additionally, the Navy had training schools for aircraft maintenance and radio operation, a naval hospital, a receiving station, and many other U.S. Navy offices at the airfield. The runways were lengthened, new ones were added, and hangars were built to handle the flood of arriving aircraft. Astoria's naval air station was a fast-growing city with its own police force, chow halls, barracks and movie theaters.

New planes arrived every day from aircraft manufacturers up and down the West Coast. Each escort carrier required a

minimum of 28 planes. Soon, the gray skies around the airfield filled with all types of aircraft: Grumman F4F Wildcat fighters, the Avenger torpedo bombers, the Douglas SBD dive bombers and, from Tongue Point, the Catalina flyboats. As the pilots and crews trained, there were many accidents. Some planes went down during their training flights, while others crashed upon landing or, as my father told me years later, some pilots undershot the runway and ditched in the shallow, muddy waters of Youngs Bay. This was a dangerous business, with young, inexperienced pilots at the controls.

On the home front, the tiny Astoria railroad station filled with strange faces and voices from all around America. These men and woman had different accents, uniforms and lifestyles. They filled the quiet streets, bars, shops and waterfront, turning Astoria into a diverse crab-pot. There was rationing of everything: food, gas, rubber and scrap metal. And as the local men marched off to war, the local women stepped forward, taking over their jobs. There were women fishermen, lumberjacks, bartenders and auto mechanics. While Portland had Rosie the Riveter, Astoria boasted the resourceful Daughters of the Columbia. Everyone pulled together for one common cause: the war effort.

After the escort aircraft carriers were completed in Vancouver, they steamed to Astoria for sea trials across the Columbia River bar. If the carrier performed to the high standards set by the many Navy supervisors aboard, the ship would be commissioned into the fleet. Once this was accomplished, the carrier sailed again for the open ocean and waited for its aircraft and flight crews

to arrive from the Tongue Point Naval Air Station. This marrying of ship and planes on the open sea was another dangerous time for the untested pilots. Some had trouble landing on the small flight deck while others overshot the deck and crashed into the cold sea. Carrier pilots had to have nerves of steel. Finally, with all its planes recovered, an escort carrier, with a complement of just over 900 officers and men, would steam toward their first combat assignment.

In less than two years, Kaiser's company built and delivered all 50 carriers to the U.S. Navy. At the end of the war, America had lost 12 aircraft carriers to enemy action. Five of those sunk were Casablanca-class escort carriers built on the Columbia River. Today, unfortunately, not one of these ships has survived the years. They were all scrapped at the end of the war.

I never did become a Navy pilot, but I served in the Oregon Air National Guard as a photo reconnaissance photographer. Today, with my chin whiskers gray and my hair snow-white, I realize that my early heroes should have included all of the men and woman, in or out of uniform, who helped defeat the tyranny of our enemies. They preserved our freedoms and our American way of life.

Aug. 15 was the 71st anniversary of V-J Day (Victory over Japan Day) and the end of the war. The surrender was announced Aug. 15 around the world, and the official surrender document was signed Sept. 2. As we all pay tribute to the World War II generation, let us never forget that we share our tomorrows because of their yesterdays.

Brian Ratty is a local, award-winning author of historical fiction, and has just released his fifth novel, "Voyage of Atonement." For more information, visit www.DutchClarke.com