

HONORED TO SERVE

Pendleton resident celebrates 98th birthday,
reflects on service during World War II



Staff photos by Ben Lonergan

Walt Ronish, a 98-year-old World War II veteran, stands for a portrait in the living room of his daughter's Pendleton home wearing his Army uniform jacket.

By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Walt Ronish of Pendleton celebrated his 98th birthday Monday, Sept. 2, Labor Day. At 98 years and a day, he recalled some of his labor from World War II.

"We were all gung-ho in those days, you know that," he said.

Gung-ho to enlist in the military and take on the Axis powers in Europe and Asia. But Ronish didn't get to go in when the United States entered the war in December 1941. He was a logger in Denton, Montana, he said, and that earned him deferments. But by the summer 1944, he was aching to go. His uncles served in the Army in the First World War, so the Army it would be for him.

"I wanted to serve like the rest of the boys," he said, and he told his boss he was going and he told his wife, Glenola. They had been married about three years.

The Army sent him to Camp Robin, California, for basic training. He learned to be an auto mechanic and to use a rifle and bayonet. The training, he said, was to the point: "You either were doing good or you got booted in the butt."

Ronish graduated from basic on July 24, 1944. That memory still brings a lump in his throat.

"It was good seeing all them boys," Ronish said. "I was proud — that's what I'm trying to say."

Ronish said he no longer recalls the units he served in. Those numbers and designations have faded in his mind. But he remembered getting seasick on the ride over to fight in Japan and Asia. He didn't see heavy combat but served in New Guinea, the Philippines and Okinawa. The amphibious assault of Zamboanga in the Philippines carries one of his most painful memories.

After U.S. forces secured Zamboanga, Ronish said, he and other soldiers were above an airfield and watched as a Curtiss SB2C Helldiver flew by. They waved at the two-seater fighter plane. Several hundred feet later the engine conked out and the plane crashed into the waters off the island. The two men inside died.

He choked up. He said that was hard to see them go that way.

Ronish said he never took a bullet but broke his ankle at the battle of Okinawa. That effectively ended his time in the field. The Army flew him in a big Douglas C-54 Skymaster to a hospital in Guam. There, he said, he "got the yellow jaundice."

Infectious hepatitis was the top nuisance of the war. The disease attacks the liver, thus jaundice is an obvious symptom.

"I turned yellow," Ronish said. "I mean I was yellow. I was as yellow as a pill."

Many of the men were just as sick from the disease, he said, and just after he healed up from the fracture and the hepatitis, the U.S. prepared to invade Japan.

President Harry Truman cut that off, he said, when we "dropped the bomb" on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Ronish had to endure one more stretch of misery on the ship back to the U.S. The hospital vessel tracking to San Francisco plowed through a typhoon, he said, and the storm about sunk the vessel.

"I was sick already," Ronish said. "I didn't need that."

The years after the war he returned to logging, and he and Glenola raised a family. They were married 76 years, he said, and she passed away in 2017.

Now he lives with his daughter, Sonja Ronish, at her place in Pendleton. She said the family came out for her dad's birthday, and he loved it.

Walt Ronish attributed clean living to his long life.

"I never smoked, never drank or chewed," he said.

"Just worked."

And while his Army uniform does not fit as snug as it once did, he treasures it and what it means to him.

"I was honored to serve," he said. "That's all I can say."



A collection of Walt Ronish's photographs of himself and his fellow soldiers from their deployment during World War II lays on the table in his daughter's house in Pendleton.



Walt Ronish reminisces over photos as he sits at the dining table in his daughter's living room in Pendleton.