

“Idaho StoryCorps: World War II Minesweepers Recall Life At Sea,” p1

Samantha Wright
Boise State Public Radio

Life aboard a minesweeper in World War II was dangerous duty. The boats swept harbors and coastline for the deadly underwater mines planted by Germany and Japan. Two men, who now live in Idaho, were part of the U.S. Navy’s minesweeping fleet.

John Burns and Robert Haga each served on different ships. They met at the Warhawk Air Museum. Every first Tuesday of the month, the museum hosts a get together, known as the Kilroy Coffee Klatsch, to meet and swap war stories. Burns was wearing a hat with the name of his minesweeper, the USS Medrick. Haga wore a similar hat, from the minesweeper the USS Chickadee. Burns says they were immediately bonded as soon as they saw each other’s hats.

Haga’s ship went to Normandy June 5, 1944, the day before the Allied Invasion. Their job was to clear out mines before D-Day to allow troop ships to land in France.

“We swept at night and we swept during the day,” said Haga. “On June 6, when daylight came, the Germans really opened up fire and we opened fire too, our big ships which were behind us because we had swept the path for them. They were shooting over us. Had they sunk us minesweepers, I think it wouldn’t have been the invasion that day, they would have probably had to call it off until they could get something going somewhere else, where it wasn’t as dangerous with the mines.”

“The troops would not have been able to land if it wasn’t for us minesweepers,” said Burns. “We swept all around the islands of the South Pacific during the war. Then we went into Japan. They had to go into Tokyo and sign the peace treaty. My ship, we mined Kobe Harbor, all around the China Sea side of Japan.”

Burns’ minesweeper, the USS Medrick, was a small craft. There was a crew of 33 with three officers. It was made of wood from top to bottom so the magnetic mines wouldn’t be attracted to it. The Medrick went in first, into unknown waters, to find the mines before the other ships came in.

“It was dangerous,” explained Burns. “We knew where the charts were on the mines, but there were some that came loose. They were floating, but some did not float to the top. They were under the water but they were caught on something.”

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"So we'd have to send a diver down and the diver would put on this heavy old fashioned diving gear. We'd lower him over the side and he'd go down and check the chain on the mine and if it was caught, he'd loosen the chain so the mine would float on top of the water."

"So we'd get him up as fast as we could and then two or three of us would take a rifle and aim it and shoot at the mine and blow it up. And when we blew up that mine, our ship was so small and so light, it would just come right out of the water and fly and then it would land with a thump. Your stomach was up in your nose somewhere. But then that night we'd celebrate and make pizza and have a pizza party."

"One night I was on duty, I was at the helm," said Burns. "It was the 12 to 4 am watch, I think, or maybe the 4 to 8 am watch and I was supposed to be relieved by a buddy who lived in Idaho. So he's coming to relieve me. He opened the hatch and walked in and we had a counter and he just went over to the counter and laid down. He was so sleepy but he didn't dog [close] the hatch."

"This is very, very rough seas. A little wooden ship like that is like a ball in a bathtub, a cork. The ship lurched, a wave came and hit us from one side. I'm on the wheel, I was knocked off the wheel, slide across the floor, feet hit the hatch curb, and out I went. I went into the deep blue. There was a railing, luckily I grabbed the railing, and my feet were dangling, I looked down, there was ocean beneath me. I looked up and there was a starry sky and I said 'Oh my God, this is it!'

"Then another wave came from the other side and first thing I knew I was right back where I was - standing at the helm. Thank God. The Captain's up there 'What the hell's going on down there?' So my buddy got up and dogged the hatch. That was a scary moment."