



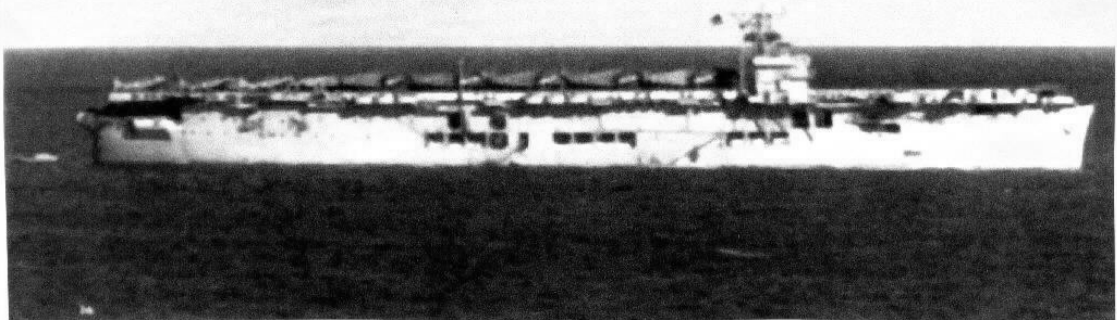
Richard Stolz



Donald Schroeder



LST 50



USS SANGAMON CVE 26

Comparing Triumphs and Tragedies: Two World War II Experiences

by Olivia Stolz

World War II was a time of great triumphs and significant tragedies, and each person involved has his own positive and negative stories to tell. I was fortunate enough to be able to interview my grandfathers, Richard Stolz and Donald Schroeder, both of whom began their lives in the state of Wisconsin and entered the U.S. Navy in the same year during World War II. Most of the information I've found for other projects has been found before because someone else has researched it before I have. This time, however, I was really the first one to research and record it. My Grandpa Stolz spent most of his time in the European Theater of Operations and some in the Pacific, while nearly all of my Grandpa Schroeder's time was spent in the Pacific. Both men were in the vicinity of Okinawa at the same time, although bearing different responsibilities. Their journeys took them in separate directions after the battle; they eventually lived in the same town, but they did not meet each other for the first time until about thirty-five years later through their children's marriage. These two Navy veterans from the Second World War experienced major tragedies, but they have looked beyond their initial perceptions of these events and are able to see the triumphant aspects.

Richard Stolz graduated from Green Bay East High School in 1942. He started college at the University of Wisconsin-Madison that September, but was drafted into the Navy the next February. He did not have a choice in this matter, but was very excited about it anyway. He said that no one wanted "to be at home when they were eligible to join the service." The Navy would have been his first choice nonetheless because he enjoyed being on the water.

Boot camp at Farragut, Idaho, was just the beginning of a great learning experience. Suddenly he was being ordered to march, run, and do exercises, and it was nothing like his easy life at home. It was also a challenge to live with and work with people every day who were all so different from him and from each other. "Some of them had lived good lives; some had lived terrible lives," he said. Upon completion of boot camp, he enrolled at the signalman school there and graduated in October of 1943.

What was a signalman's job? Because no radio signals were allowed to emanate from a ship (it could only receive signals from land), the only communication between ships could be visual. There were four different methods of accomplishing this. If any of these signals were misinterpreted, ships could break up the formation and collide. My grandfather was the chief signalman, which meant he had to make sure that a competent signalman was keeping watch for every four-hour period. "The ocean can be cold and lonely on the open windswept conning tower, especially on a black moonless night when you can barely make out the ships ahead," he said. Learning and retaining all of this information and bearing such responsibility at a young age was a great triumph for him.

After he learned his responsibilities, he joined the crew of the tank landing ship LST 50 in New Orleans. An LST was engineered to carry cargo to places that may or may not

have had a loading dock. According to my grandfather, it was designed to “head directly onto a beach, open its bow doors, lower its landing ramp and discharge its cargo onto a beach.” That cargo consisted mostly of vehicles that could be driven off of the ship. Stolz said, “It was an [indispensable] part of an invasion force in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters since docking facilities were mostly destroyed or non-existent.” This type of ship would also carry provisions to various places, because “...there were over 200,000 men of Army, Navy and Marine Corps ashore on Saipan, Tinian and Guam in January 1945...who had to be fed.”

From New Orleans, the LST 50 made its way across the rough, sub-infested Atlantic and “stayed in various ports in southern England until the June 6 [1944] Normandy invasion.” They “participated in the initial landings, dropping off men and equipment after beaching.” Later, they went back and forth with casualties many times from Normandy to England as a hospital ship.

The LST 50 then joined a convoy on its way to the Mediterranean and stopped at several places before participating in the Invasion of Southern France near St. Tropez that began on August 15, 1944. They then carried troops from Africa to Marseilles, France. However, the ship ran into what Stolz called a “monster typhoon” and was split down both sides, but managed to make it to Palermo, Sicily for repairs. After visiting ports throughout North Africa, the ship left Tunisia for New York to be refitted, repainted and prepared for Pacific duty. This included a month-long leave for Christmas, which most men were never lucky enough to get. It “was just the greatest,” he said, and it “couldn’t have come at a better time. I remember that I didn’t let the family know I was coming home...I just called them up from the Green Bay railroad station and asked them to pick me up. They didn’t even know that I was back in the country.” This put his mother in such a state that his sister told him confidentially “never to do that again.” In January of 1945, the LST 50 departed for the Pacific. They stopped at Honolulu, Eniwetok, Saipan and the Tinian Islands before going to the Battle of Okinawa in April.

During the invasion of Southern France, an operation code-named “Dragoon,” a tragic event occurred. The ships had received orders to beach. The LST 282, with which the LST 50 was traveling, was supposed to go in first, but as the LST 50 was closer, it took the lead. Just as they were preparing to beach, they saw a plane flying at high altitude. Suddenly, a fireball appeared near the plane. The men realized it was a rocket-propelled, radio-controlled bomb. They began shooting at it, but the bomb was coming at them too quickly. It crashed into the LST 282’s main deck amidships and blasted right through to the bottom. Everyone on the LST 50 stood in shock for a moment before realizing they needed to get working on their rescue efforts. Men on the LST 282 jumped over the side of their ship. Many of them burned or drowned, although the LST 50 sent over rescue boats as quickly as they could. One rescue boat sank under the weight of all of the men crowded into it. The men of the LST 50 were extremely grateful that their ship was not hit by the bomb, especially because it was supposed to be in that position. Also, prior to the bombing, the French men, who were helping to take back their own country, were very reluctant and afraid to come off of their ship. However, when they saw what had happened to the LST 282, they “quickly got their tails in gear and made tracks to unload.”

wasting no time in driving off and moving up the beach. In this way, it was a triumph – one good thing that came of the tragedy.

After the war, Stolz went back to the University of Wisconsin-Madison as a freshman, along with other men who had been in the service. “We were just three years older [than the other freshmen], but we felt a lot older,” he said. “[The war] was three years out of my life and it was well spent. It made a man out of me.” Also, visiting so many different parts of the world caused him to “get a good cross-section of all those different people and the way they live,” he said. For example, while Ireland, England, France, Italy, Africa, Hawaii, and Japan were all very diverse, he realized that even the people in New York were very different from those in Green Bay, where he grew up. “And that’s part of the maturing process.”

My other grandfather, Donald Schroeder, was a 1943 graduate of Lincoln High School in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. According to him, his life before entering the Navy was a rather dull one. “I was extremely bashful,” he said. He never went very far from home, and the only people he knew besides family were a few friends that he had in the neighborhood, from school and from after-school jobs. At the end of high school, he volunteered for the draft because he “wanted to be a hero.” He said that “everyone wanted to be part of winning the war.” He specifically wanted to join the Navy because he “didn’t want to live in a foxhole,” which seemed to be the general perception of Army service. One of the requirements for going overseas was the ability to swim. My grandfather knew he couldn’t meet this requirement, so he gave someone else five dollars and his dog tags to swim the test for him. This, of course, was not allowed, he said, but there were so many other men taking the test at the same time that the authorities didn’t notice. He was home until July 7 when he, like my other grandfather, went to Farragut for boot camp. Schroeder, however, went to school there to become a quartermaster, finishing on January 28, 1944.

A quartermaster’s main duty was to work with the navigator in keeping the ship on course. To determine the speed and course of the ship, he had to plot the ship’s position using the speed and direction of the wind and tide. He also had to stand watch and keep a written log of the conditions, including weather, sea conditions, sunrise and sunset, changes in formation of other ships, and basically anything else he saw or heard. It was also necessary to keep track of who was keeping the records during each four-hour watch period.

Next, he traveled to Pearl Harbor and was assigned to the escort carrier U.S.S. *Sangamon*-CVE 26, which departed shortly thereafter. He says that a personal triumph of his was “successfully making the transition to living with so many people from so many different backgrounds in such a small space.” Escort carriers in general escorted other ships and carried about 30 aircraft. The *Sangamon* took part in the invasion of Ataipe, Hollandia and Terha Mirha, New Guinea, as well as the invasion of Guam and Saipan. “This is where the Jap Navy came out with big carrier force and took a beating in what was called the ‘Big Turkey Shoot,’” Schroeder said. In September, they took part in the

invasion of Biak Island, Halmahera Island and Morotia Island of Northern New Guinea as part of the 7th Fleet.

Then, in October, the *Sangamon* was involved in the largest naval battle in history: the Battle of Leyte Gulf “that took place in October of 1944 when General MacArthur returned to the Philippines.” Schroeder considers this his most important battle triumph. It involved 286 ships, of the United States and Australia on one side and Japan on the other. It was the “last stand for the Jap Navy,” he said. There were 2,500 casualties for the U.S. Navy, but after that battle, the Japanese “no longer possessed the means to wage effective warfare.” The ship traveled to Ulithi Harbor to meet the 5th Fleet for the Battle of Okinawa, which began on April 1, 1944, and turned into the longest and bloodiest battle of the war for the U.S. Navy. On May 4, the *Sangamon* was hit by a Japanese kamikaze plane. This was his most tragic experience of the war.

The *Sangamon* and its crew supported the invasion of Okinawa leading up to the kamikaze attack. First, a single-engine fighter plane tried a “suicide run” and hit the water, but came so close that a radio antenna on the ship was taken off. “It felt as though the ship had been lifted out of the water and shaken and the noise of the explosion was terrific,” Schroeder said. Half an hour later, a twin-engine bomber came in from astern, dropped a five-hundred-pound bomb when it came within fifty feet of the bridge, and then crashed into the flight deck. Some of the men were blown overboard and others jumped off. My grandfather said that his main reaction was to save the ship, because “after all that was our home and that is one big dark ocean that time of night.” All of the planes on the hangar and flight decks were destroyed by the fire that was out of control for about three hours. “I thought I had gone to hell,” he recalls. “It wiped out all the electrical, mechanical, water and radio equipment for several hundred feet in the middle of the ship.” The fire was finally put out with the assistance of many other ships in the area. Twenty-eight men lost their lives, and 111 were injured in the attack. A total of 115 men went over the side and were picked up by other ships, never to return to the crew of the *Sangamon*. The first tasks that needed to be completed after the situation was under control were to return to the task force and bury their fallen comrades at sea. The ship made it back to the U.S. on June 12.

“I guess the biggest triumph was [that] I survived,” said Schroeder. “From the standpoint of the Navy, if you brought your ship back that was really a plus because a lot of them went down. From what we were told, we were the second worst damaged ship ever to make it back.” Speaking of his war experience in general, he said, “I learned how to be dependent on myself rather than my parents. I certainly got to see a lot of the world.” He still keeps in touch with many of the friends he made. The only negative aspect of it was the bad memories throughout the rest of his life, but “I never was sorry I did it. I got to learn how to get along with people of every religion, every color...it was a big learning experience.”

Many years later, my grandfathers Stolz and Schroeder ended up in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, where they raised their children and eventually met when their son and daughter got married. They knew that each other were in the Navy at around the same

time, but they did not know until I conducted my research that, for example, they were both at Okinawa on the same day. I've also learned that war, in the end, is a triumph for those who come out victorious. But war is never solely a triumph; there are inevitable tragedies involved. I discovered that they have similar attitudes about the things that happened to them. At first glance, most of the events they dreaded seemed horrible when they actually happened. However, nothing good will come of a disaster if we don't look on the bright side, and also remember what could have happened. They have looked back on these tragedies and consider them triumphs in the end.