

War Era Story Project 2012

Submitted by: R. William Vogel

Current home town: Milford, Ohio

Age: 95

Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, the world changed for us. It's easy to remember the date; it's my birthday. I had just turned 25, the youngest in a family of six children: Three sisters, two brothers. My father was a railroad worker. Life was meager in the soot-filled skies of Pittsburgh. The war demands strained production from the huge steel mills, but more significantly, it called out manpower from family, friends and neighbors as thousands were drawn into the fray.

In 1937, I fell in love with a neighborhood beauty and we eloped without telling anyone but our closest friends. We put our coins together, bought a bus ticket to Wheeling, WV, and found a minister to confer the official lifelong link. Back home in Pittsburgh, we lived separately with our families. One night, her ring slipped out of her blouse at home. Her parents found it and immediately kicked her out of the house. From then on, we were together and the world knew it.

I was a machinist at the time and making barely enough on which to live. We would find simple pleasures in getting out for a date with friends who knew we were one. Then came December 7, 1941. The machine shop was in great demand to help the war effort. They would not release me to join up as I watched friends enlist. The call to duty was very strong and I decided to quit the job and signed up in 1942. The U.S. Navy was my choice. It changed my life dramatically.

One day in basic training, a note was posted: "Volunteers needed for dangerous mission. There is a strong chance you will not come back." It got my attention. There was a job to do and that was what I was there for.

The Japanese had taken control of numerous islands in the South Pacific. Our Marines were dying by the thousands as they attempted to invade those islands. The problem was due to lack of accurate information about water conditions, beachheads and enemy positions. Photo reconnaissance did not give a true picture of water depth or mines. Landing barges would unknowingly discharge their warriors burdened with heavy gear into deep water resulting in many drowning. On-scene personnel were needed to get to those beaches and relay information back to the landing forces so they could make proper decisions. They needed swimmers; I could swim.

Under Water Demolition teams with the moniker of "Frogmen," (the precursor to today's SEALs) were formed and received the briefest of training in Florida. From there, under strict security, we were secreted off by train to the west coast and on to a troop ship to the South Pacific.

With nothing but a mask, bathing suit, knife and a slate on which to record data, we would slip into rubber boats from our little destroyer, motor into a beach as close as possible, then the swim the remaining leg, logging water depth and hazards the Japanese had placed. We used explosives as well to

break up mine fields and barriers. Our unofficial motto was “live for the day because we will probably die tomorrow.” Simple words cannot describe the action. From island to island, we pulled off some amazing tasks that helped our guys take the beaches.

Back home, my Betty knew nothing of the dangers in which I was involved. Letters were edited both coming and going. We were sworn to secrecy on our mission. I kept that promise until just a few years ago.