

Signalman 3rd Class, Conrad Sigmon United States Navy Armed Guard World War II 1944 - 1946

Little remembered today, the Navy Armed Guard was a service branch of the United States Navy that was responsible for defending United States and Allied merchant ships from attack by enemy aircraft, submarines and surface ships during WW II. The men of the Armed Guard served primarily as gunners, signal men and radio operators on cargo ships, tankers, troop ships and other merchant vessels.



The origins of the U.S. Navy Armed Guard date to World War I, during which some 384 U.S. merchant vessels carried guns and Navy personnel. This earlier version of the Armed Guard was disbanded following World War I and its modest scope hardly resembled that of the Armed Guard of World War II. Late in the war, many experienced Armed Guard sailors were reassigned from duty aboard merchant vessels to serve as gunners on warships of the U.S. fleet, where their training and experience made them particularly valuable. With the end of World War II the Navy Armed Guard, like other military units, was rapidly drawn down in size as men were discharged from service. Small numbers of Armed Guard personnel were kept aboard merchant vessels to maintain the guns until the weapons were removed from the ships and returned to the Navy. The disarming of merchant ships continued into 1946. Like the Armed Guard with whom they sailed, the men of the merchant marine helped make possible the Allied victory in World War II.

Conrad Sigmon was born in Rocky Mount, Virginia on November 23, 1925 to Lorton and Blanch Sigmon. After he graduated from high school, he enlisted in the Navy in April of 1944 and went on to Boot Camp at Camp Perry in Virginia and from there to Bainbridge, Maryland to Signalman School. While in school, he and another trainee were using semaphore flags across a pond from one another to send messages about an instructor that they weren't fond of. Little did they know that the instructor was watching them and he understood the messages very well. Needless to say, they gave up their liberty. Another time, his brother who was in the Army in Tennessee was going overseas and he wanted to see Conrad before he left. He asked his commanding officer if he could have a leave to meet him at Camp Meade and was denied. He never got to see his brother before he left for overseas and he never forgot that. His brother made it home as a decorated soldier.

Conrad was assigned to the Liberty Ship, S.S. George Westinghouse and was on his way to Le Havre, France. Liberty ships were built in the U.S. during WWII. They were cheap and quick to build. The quickest ever built was launched in four days, fifteen and a half hours after the keel was laid. They served their purpose even though they were not the prettiest ships in the fleet.

December 15, 1944 began as a beautiful morning as they headed up the English Channel to South Hampton where they would load ballast for one of their trips back to the states. As they crossed the channel, the strongest storm ever to hit there came up causing a very strong undertow and heavy winds. High waves caused some 15 empty ships in the channel to rock uncontrollably into one another. Damage to the S.S. George Westinghouse caused a hole in the side of the ship which was high enough for them to continue, but all their life boats were lost. The next morning, they saw no ships in the channel and headed into South Hampton, loaded ballast and had the hole patched up. They finally made contact with a convoy of 86 ships that would head back to the states. The convoy was supposed to have 101 ships, but 15 of them sustained heavy damage or were sunk during the storm. Thirty-two Armed Guard members perished during the storm. Conrad also heard that the same storm was the one that claimed the life of Big Band Leader, Glen Miller when his plane disappeared and was never found.

Two days later on their way back, a destroyer escort came alongside their ship and started rolling depth charges to try to destroy a suspected German U-Boat riding underneath the Westinghouse. This caused their steering to break rendering them dead in the water. The destroyer stayed behind with them until repairs could be made and they eventually caught up with the rest of the convoy.

On the way back to the states, the crew could hear cracking and popping. That sound ended up coming from the welds breaking on the Westinghouse and he wondered if they would make it back. They finally made it back to New York for a 2 week rest while the ship was being wrapped with new metal. Then it was off to Portuguese South Africa by way of Trinidad for a trip without an escort that was pretty uneventful, except that President Roosevelt had died and the Germans surrendered. He remembers the fishing was really good there and that they

brought back two cheetahs from Africa that were to go to a zoo in the United States. Conrad said that ratio wise, the Armed Guard lost more men than the Army during WWII. Once while on a practice mission, where their ships were firing their weapons, one shell went off course and struck a British ship killing two British sailors. The Westinghouse ended up being close enough to watch the burial at sea. Conrad still vividly remembers this experience. Once while in New York, he saw actor, Mickey Rooney and singer, Bobby Breen when they were entertaining Italian POW's. Another one of Conrad's remembrances was about a cook in service on the Merchant Marine ship who spent an excessive amount of time in the kitchen baking cookies and treats for the men on board. When asked why he did that, he said, "I have a boy in the service and I hope someone is treating him well too." Conrad received many ribbons for his service and was discharged in April of 1946.



He took advantage of the GI Bill and learned carpentry where he worked in the building business for most of his adult life until he retired. One of the things that Conrad shared with us was a priceless album put together by the town where he grew up containing pictures and information for everyone who served, those who were lost and the Gold Star Mothers from that area. A man with a sense of humor, when asked if he had ever been shot at during the war, his answer was; "If they did, they missed!" A member of Hampstead American Legion Post 200, he and his wife, Margaret L. (Frock) live in the Manchester area. He has two sons and one stepdaughter. We enjoyed spending time with him and we thank him for his service to our country.

Conrad wrote this poem about Memorial Day and it was read at the service at the War Memorial.

"Just Lived Too Long"

As I look out my window on this chilly Memorial Day,
to look at the American flags, flying on display.
Some are tattered and worn as though they had been at Omaha Beach,
Some are hanging improperly, but still they look so neat.
I guess us World War Vets have just lived too long.
The glory in Old Glory is almost gone.
They throw her on the ground and burn her in the street.
Supreme Court says, "It's an expression of free speech."
We carried her through World Wars One and Two.
So proud were we of that red, white and blue.
So many sons and daughters made the supreme sacrifice.
They gave of their bodies and yes, their life.
She was carried across the Pacific into Tojo land;
It was on Mt. Suribachi that she made her stand.
She traveled across the Atlantic, in the ice, snow and rain.
She was flying high when she brought down Hitler's reign.
Soon there would be Korea, Vietnam and Desert Storm.
New pride in her was once again born.
We fought for the freedom of people everywhere,
so on Memorial Day, please show that you care.
Just keep in mind if you decide to throw her on the ground,
a veteran might be nearby who would gladly take you down.
Now they build us a monument that will be something to behold,
but most World War II vet's bodies have long been cold.
They say it's for future generations to know of our sacrifice,
to be seen by those who gave so much would have been nice.
So come on America, let's unite and become one
to guard against missiles, which one day will surely come.
To be united like we were during World War Two,
There's nothing in this world that American cannot do!
God Bless America!