

Highlands Today: A Veteran Is Honored

By Gary Pinnell

August 4, 2008

LAKE PLACID - It happened one day, near the end of World War II, aboard the U.S.S. Lexington, one of finest ships in the American fleet. The Lex was an aircraft carrier, and that made it a large, rather irresistible target.

Two Japanese kamikaze planes found it. Robert Nieman spotted the first suicide plane before it came in, and warned the crew. No one knows how many lives may have been saved by that early warning.

At least, his commanding officer thought so. "V.W. Litch," it says, on the back of a photo of Nieman his wife Bettie discovered just a few days ago. It was always in the family album, but no one knew there was writing on the back.

"Robert Nieman, by his alertness, rapid identification of, and coolness in reporting under fire, contributed materially to the defense of the vessel." It was signed by Litch, "Captain, U.S.N., 11/24/44, U.S.S. Lexington, Airplane Carrier, 3,000 men."

Nieman's captain probably visited one day when Nieman was still in the hospital.

Bosun's Mate Nieman, who was 18 when he enlisted, took up his gun and began firing on the enemy. But a second Japanese plane hit the great ship, killing even more of Nieman's shipmates.

"His whole gun crew was wiped out," said his son, Bob Jr. His dad had a stroke 15 years ago, which paralyzed his right arm and made speaking difficult. "Except for him. There were 10 in his gun crew."

The sailor was awarded a chestful of medals - that's not an exaggeration. And that's where Congressman Tim Mahoney came into the picture on Saturday afternoon.

It's unclear whether Nieman never got those medals, or whether he lost them. Anyway, his wife, Bettie, wanted him to have them. So she contacted his brother in Cincinnati, who e-mailed the Palm Beach Gardens congressman.

Mahoney had an intern research the matter. They secured the replacements from the Navy, and Mahoney dropped by Nieman's house, south of Lake Placid, with the decorations displayed in an oak box.

There was a WWII Victory Medal, American Campaign Medal, Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal (with one Silver and four Bronze Stars), Residential Unit Citation Ribbon, Combat Action Ribbon, discharge button, and the Honorable Service Lapel Pin, called "the ruptured duck."

"Come on over here," Mahoney said, putting an arm around Bobby Nieman, 15, Bob Junior's son. "These will probably be hanging on your wall some day."

"Did you ever think your number was up?" Mahoney asked the veteran, in all seriousness.

"I always thought that," Nieman admitted quietly.

Tough Going

Bob Jr. doesn't mind acknowledging his father had a tough time, mentally and physically, after he was injured in the kamikaze attack. He spent a year recovering in a Boston hospital, and five years on a beach in Miami teaching children to swim.

"He couldn't understand why he lived, and the others didn't," said Bob Jr., a Coast Guard veteran himself. Survivor's guilt is common among soldiers and sailors who never got to say goodbye to their buddies.

"He wouldn't talk about it for years," said Bettie, who got choked up enough herself to pause twice. Not, in fact, until Bob Sr. started going to the Lexington reunions, about seven years ago.

Mahoney wanted to know how young Robert and Bettie met.

"What did you see in him?" Mahoney teased.

"His blue eyes," Bettie answered, without missing a beat. "He was so handsome."

They were honored, Bettie Nieman said, to have a congressman in their humble home.

"The honor is mine," said Mahoney.

"You," the congressman said, "are a genuine American hero."