

Lee F. Burtch

U.S. Navy



Lee Francis Burtch
WWII Us Navy Radioman

Lee Francis Burtch was born in Springfield, Illinois on October 19, 1920 the son of Lee and Marie Burtch . He was attending the University of Illinois at Champaign when WW II broke out, Lee enlisted in the United States Navy in July 1942. While home on leave, he married Loraine Cruse on Christmas Day, 1942. He often said that he was engaged, married and separated in 4 days.

Lee entered the Navy's school of communications at Northwestern University and was assigned as a radioman on the USS Baltimore, a heavy cruiser headed toward the war zone in the Pacific. The USS Baltimore was in the front of several Pacific naval engagements. Lee and his shipmates were in sea battles at Luzon and Mindanao in the Philippines. They struck at the China coast and Japan proper. The Baltimore saw further action at Iwo Ji-

ma, Guam, Rota, Tinian, Saipan, Truk, Okinawa, Formosa and the Marshall Islands. Lee remembers seeing many kamikaze pilots shot down. He was so close at times he could see their faces and could only think that was some mother's son. Their ship rescued many American men out of those waters as ships around them were sunk.

Lee remembers being off Iwo Jima when it was announced that Ernie Pyle, the WW II correspondent, had been killed on the island. His ship was the first to receive the news. Pyle was from nearby Dana, Indiana, near Highway 36, a few miles east of the Illinois border. Few people today know the name Ernie Pyle, but at that time everyone knew of him.

The Baltimore was ordered back to San Francisco, California, while on its way to Pearl Harbor the day it was bombed. The crew was greatly disappointed and did not know why they were being called back. But as ramps were being built onto the ship, it was evident that President Franklin Roosevelt was going to board. He had requested the USS Baltimore since that was where he was from. The ship with the President aboard arrived in Pearl Harbor July 26, 1944. There was a great reception for the President where 1,000 planes passed over the ship in salute. Men on tugs were dressed whites standing at attention. Admirals Nimitz and King and General MacArthur and others were present. We took President Roosevelt to Adak, Alaska and on to Kodiak, Alaska and then to Auke Bay where the President went fishing. The date was August 9, 1944. FDR boarded the USS Cummings to take the inland route back to Seattle, WA. Lee remembered the President being criticized by the public for this fishing side trip since we were at war. Lee also remembers the President's little dog, a black Scottish terrier named Fala. The dog was clan shaven when they got off the ship. The sailors had clipped hairs for souvenirs.

Lee remembered that the USS Baltimore had traveled in the same waters as the USS Indianapolis one month prior to the sinking of the ship on July 30, 1945. It was unbelievable to Lee

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that the Indianapolis was unescorted in such dangerous waters. The USS Baltimore was escorted by two destroyers through the same waters where known Japanese subs would sink the Indianapolis only one month later. Because of the damage from two separate typhoons, the Baltimore could only make 12 to 14 knots which was about half speed. This happened east of the island of Leyte. Being a radioman, Lee well remembered the many hours spent with sonar and could not believe that the Indianapolis had crossed those waters without escort. There had been a mix-up in communications that went unnoticed for quite some time. (This was researched by Lee later in life as to the timing of the crossing of the Baltimore and Indianapolis through the same dangerous waters.)

(Typhoon Notes from Lee's Log)

On June 5, 1945, our ship suffered further damage while enduring a second typhoon in the South China Sea. Our only casualty from the war was one man washed overboard during the typhoon. The first typhoon hit us on December 18, 1944 between Formosa (Taiwan) and the Philippines. There were so many ships needing repair that we had to wait our turn at Pearl Harbor. While undergoing the overhaul at Pearl on August 15, 1945, the war in the Pacific was declared over.

Lee was up for promotion to Chief Petty Officer, but he also had enough points to leave the Navy. He was discharged on October 2, 1945 at Shoemaker, California. When asked how long he had served, he was quick to reply, "3 years, 2 months and 7 days." Most of that time was on the ship and he was more than ready to see dry land. He returned home to Champaign, IL and worked for 30 years as salesman and buyer for the Joseph Kuhn Company,

a clothing store. Lee and Loraine have three children, Robert, James and Diana. Lee is 87, retired and lives in Savoy, Illinois

Lee Francis Burtch

Submitted by his son, Robert Burtch, January, 2008

Springfield, Champaign, Savoy, Illinois



USS Baltimore WWII