

William P. Canavan

U.S. Navy USS Niblack DD- 424



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U.S. Navy, WWII
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William P. Canavan was born in Cowenbeath Fife Scotland on September 25, 1919. He is the oldest of four sons of Thomas and Susan (Clusker) Canavan. His father, Thomas traveled to Springfield, Illinois in 1922 for work and to get established before he sent for his wife Susan and their two sons. William "Bill" came to America at the age of four and grew up in Springfield attending St. Patrick Grade School and Feitstens High School. He joined the Navy in 1940 at the age of 20 and was stationed at Great Lakes Naval Base in Chicago, Illinois. William was a Recruit Officer and then became a Warrant Officer. He was honored for his heroism back in 1944 during WWII when he received the Navy and Marine Corp Medal of Honor for a British rescue that took place on December 11, 1943. An article and photo was published in the State Journal Register Newspaper on July 1, 1944 to honor him. William

Canavan married on July 13, 1946 and now resides with his wife Nan of 67 years in the state of Connecticut; they have three children, Cynthia, Thomas, and Scott, four grandchildren and one great grandchild.

William sailed on the USS Niblack DD-424, which was built as a naval destroyer and was commissioned in September 1940 from the Boston Harbor. The Niblack's shakedown cruise was along the East coast to the South Atlantic area. The Niblack was then assigned to sail to Iceland to establish an U.S. naval port. While sailing to Iceland the Niblack came upon a Norwegian vessel that had been torpedoed and sunk by a German U-boat submarine. While assisting in the rescue of 60 Norwegian sailors the Niblack's sonar detected the U-boat approaching them. At that point, the Niblack dropped 3 depth charges and then departed. William Canavan indicated that on April 10, 1941 these were the first shots fired in the unlisted Battle of the North Atlantic by a United States warship. He was the only man from Springfield, Illinois on the Niblack the day the first shots were fired in the unlisted North Atlantic Battle.

During December 1943, the USS. Niblack sailed the West Mediterranean Sea when a German U-Boat torpedoed several freighters off Bizerte, Tunisia located just west of Sicily. On the afternoon of December 11th the USS. Niblack joined with the British HMS Holcombe Escort Destroyer in search for the German U-Boat later identified as U-593. During this search the Holcombe was torpedoed and sank. William Canavan then assisted with the rescue of Holcombe's sailors. William was the motorman of a whale boat used for the rescue. The sea had a heavy covering of oil from the Holcombe's sinking. Mixed in under the oil were sailors clothing that entangled the propeller and shut down the motor preventing the whale boat to pick up survivors. William made repeated dives with his knife to cut free the clothing around the propeller. He said the Mediterranean Sea was calm on December 11, 1943, which helped in his continued dives below the boat. After numerous dives through

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the oily water the debris was removed and rescue operations were able to continue. The Niblack's crew were able to help save 90 men's lives and transported them to an Army hospital ship that same night. During the transport, the USS. Niblack spotted anti-aircraft fire from the submarine against a British Patrol Plane and directed the USS. Wainwright (DD419) and HMS Calpe to the scene where they sank the German U-593.

The USS Niblack DD 424 earned five Battle Stars for service in all Mediterranean and Italian campaigns. The ship's first star was awarded for its service protecting convoys in the North Atlantic from April 10, 1941 till the Pearl Harbor attack which officially started our World War II involvement. The Niblack made numerous North Atlantic convoy crossings to the United Kingdom. The Niblack was also honored for the rescue attempts to survivors of the first US naval ship sunk in the North Atlantic prior to our official war declaration. This vessel was the Reuben James DD-245 sunk by a German submarine on October 31, 1941.

The Niblack was decommissioned by a directive in June 1946 and entered the Atlantic Reserve Fleet at Charleston, South Carolina where she was subsequently transferred to Philadelphia where she remained until struck on July 31, 1968, sold on August 16, 1973, and broken up for scrap.

The USS Niblack had 16 officers and 260 enlisted men. Many of the crew would gather every two years for a reunion taking turns in each other's home states. One of the reunions was held in Chicago in 1994 at the Palmer House Hotel. John Shedd Reed who was one of the captains of the ship and hosted the dinner gathering at his family's famous Chicago Shedd Aquarium.

William Canavan retired from an engineering company in Connecticut where he designed submarine panels for the Navy until his retirement in 2007 at the age of 88. He has one surviving brother, Thomas and several nieces and nephews that reside in Springfield, Illinois.

Submitted by Diane Canavan, niece,
Springfield, IL



William P. Canavan
Medal of Honor Awarded
for Heroism, 1944



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