

Antarctic Diary of Baraboo Sailor

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

This story is written, or at least begun, on a hot day in June. It is destined to be published on a hot day in August if global warming remains with us. It is a cool story for a hot day.

Yes cool, for the setting is the waters of Antarctica and its environs. Regular readers will recall an article last spring about Glenister Van Zile, a Baraboo career seaman who helped in the search for Amelia Earhart in 1937. He then remained in the Navy for significant battles in the Pacific Ocean in WWII.

Like many regular Army and Navy personnel, Van Zile was promoted up the ranks to Ensign in WWII. He served in a significant array of naval engagements in both the Atlantic and the Pacific.

Following the war, many sailors remained in military service, but reverted to their GI or seaman rank, and this was true of Van Zile. He was destined to participate in one of history's great peacetime expeditions, sailing in the iceberg-clogged waters of the Antarctic Ocean under Admiral Byrd.

The Diary

Van Zile kept a copious diary, much of which was printed by the News-Republic in 1947, and there is far more than can be reviewed in this short article. Sailing in December on the USS Cacapon, he notes the gradual cooling of temperature as they leave the Equator near Tahiti (no they didn't stop there) and approach the South Pacific Ocean.

In a jocular mood, he notes that sailors wryly claim that in case their ship sinks, they will head for the nearest land, that being straight down but a mile or so. Sailors conducted a lottery on who would see the first iceberg. The Cacapon was a Cimarron Class oiler, with a 32 foot draft.

The ship was a part of a large flotilla supporting the Byrd exploratory mission, but his ship drew 33 feet of water so they had to keep well away from any icebergs.

Because December was really summer in the southern hemisphere, they soon entered a zone where there was no night at all, but the ocean temperature itself remained as low as 28 degrees, salt water of course. Nearby icebergs were as much as a mile in length, presenting a somewhat bluish tint.

Emergency Surgery

There was great concern for several days regarding a seaplane frying in the area which disappeared. Meantime an emergency

appendectomy was performed on his ship, the patient being brought in from a neighboring ship after a 300 mile rendezvous.

Patients were transferred from ship to ship by means of a breeches buoy, a sort of chair suspended on a cable run between the two ships, perhaps 100 feet or so apart. This was a harrowing ride for the sick patient, with each ship rocking back and forth in the seas, tossing the ill patient about.

In a poignant note, on New year's Eve Van Zile writes: "Today is New Year's Day 1947, the first day of a new year. I haven't been with my folks at home for Xmas or New Years for the past 12 years. Maybe next year I will be." Such is the life of a sailor. Mail call was delayed for two months, which also occurred among soldiers in Europe during WWII on occasion.

Plane crash

Eleven days passed before word of the missing plane was received, but luckily it had crashed on an ice shelf rather than into the icy sea. When found after eight days, landing was impossible for any plane. However there was a small salt lake eight miles away where an amphibious rescue plane could land.

There being no land features to go by, a plane dropped colored markings on the snow to mark the path the 6 surviving men were to follow to the lake, where a small seaplane rescued them.

This Antarctic operation was dangerous work, and Van Zile occasionally mentions a death among the seamen from various causes. Because of the cold, and because icebergs were so numerous, the Antarctic mission was finally cut short, leaving 175 men at Little America to complete the work. They remained there all of the Antarctic winter—our summer..

Some ships were icebound by icebergs, and some ships escaped thanks to two icebreaker vessels which cleared a path for them. This article has hit only a few highlights of the Antarctic expedition, and there are other events in Van Zile's life in other parts of the diary. It is recommended for those who like real-life stories of adventures at sea.

As reported in the previous article his diaries, plus a paper on his early life by his sister, Viola Erlandsen, can be read at the Sauk County Historical Society.

His family

Van Zile is the father, in his first marriage in 1935, of Sandra Van Zile Barrow of Baraboo, and her sister Glenda Van Zile Moser of Janesville. The children of his second marriage are Sharon Van Zile Jensen of Baraboo, and Steven Van Zile of Reedsburg.

Glenister is also the grandfather of Steven's daughter Tanya, who served in the U.S. Army for several years and now is married and in a military family in Kentucky. A great grandson, Jason, served in Kuwait.

Van Zile is another of Baraboo's sons who has made Baraboo proud. We can not possibly write of the exploits and experiences of everyone, but salute the past ranks of achievers, military or otherwise, who have represented us in peace and in war. Remember, too, that even today there are those who now honor us in current service to our country.

Recent battles of War were fought in places whose strange names were originally unfamiliar to us—Saipan, Bastogne, Coral Sea, Inchon, Herzegovina, and Kuwait, to mention but a few.

Today we speak with respect of our servicemen in unpronounceable places such as Fallujah, Nasiriyah, Kabul, and Mazar-i-Sharif, but hopefully not of future battles of Tehran or Islamabad. It's a terrible way to have to learn your geography.



Van Zile's Great Grandson, Jason Fulkerson, is pictured in Kuwait with an MOAB